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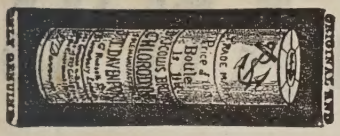

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A DEAD MAN'S STEP

A Detective Story.

BY

LAWRENCE L. LYNCH
(E. MURDOCH VAN DEVENTER),
AUTHOR OF
"SHADOWED BY THREE," "MOINA," 'A SLENDER CLUE," ETC.

SECOND EDITION.

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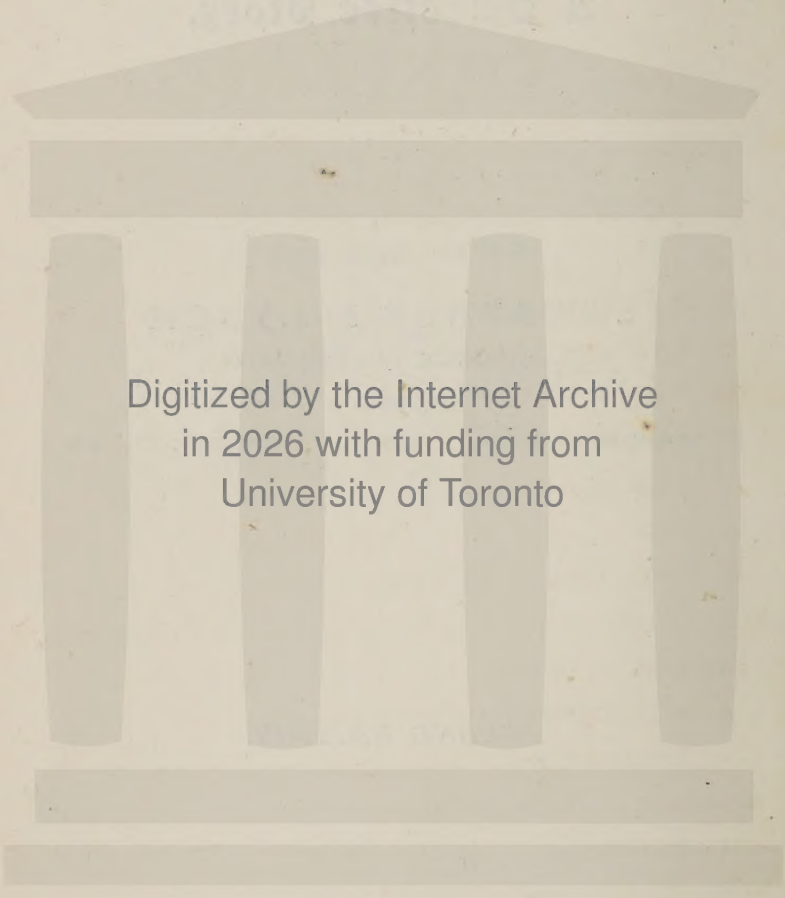

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A DEAD MAN'S STEP.

CHAPTER I.

"WOE IS ME!"

DING, dong! Boom, boom! Cling, clang, cling, clang!

Pomfret is by no means a noisy city, and when the great bell of St. Mark's peals out lustily between midnight and morning, it means trouble. It tells of fire or wreck, danger or death, and it appeals for help to all strong hands and generous hearts.

Clang, clang, clang! It is ringing wildly now, faster and faster, and already there are answering sounds in the dark, tree-shadowed streets, footsteps hastening from southward, voices faint, and then louder.

Ding, dong, ding, dong!

The appeal is loud but brief. Less than twenty rapid strokes of the bell; then a man emerges from the church, bounds down the broad steps, and calls out to the unseen comers,

"Quick, for God's sake!"

"What is it?" comes an answering voice.

"*Murder!*"

In another moment they are close together, peering at each other through the dark.

"*You*, Deering?"

"Morse! Redding! Thank heaven!" The ringer seizes an arm of each and fairly drags them back and towards a building which they have just passed. "It's Matchin," he says, while he urges them on. "The *bank*," and now they note that their guide is trembling violently and that he speaks with evident effort.

The Church of St. Mark and the Pomfret Bank both stand upon Main Street, upon the same side, and with only the width of an intersecting street between them. But while the stately church opens its great entrance-doors upon Broadway, the bank faces the lower street, and, now that they have faced about, and are retracing their steps, the two first comers see that the door of the bank stands half open, and that there is a glimmering light from within.

The bank proper is in the rear of the building, and is approached by a wide hall of entrance, flanked on each side by spacious offices, and

the glimmering light comes from the bank itself. The door at the end of the hall stands half open, and the dim rays filter through.

"This way," says the man who has led them thither, and he puts out his hand to push the door wide open.

"Stop!" cries the man nearest him. "Look!" he points downward, and they see, projecting just beyond the door, a human hand.

"My God!" cries Deering, "he has *moved!* I thought he was *dead!* Quick!" springing swiftly through the half opening. "He may be saved—perhaps."

The place is dimly lighted by a low burning lamp against the side wall, but it sheds all its glow upon the face of the man who lies almost beneath it, and close against the door, and the three bend together and peer into that bruised and blood-stained face.

"Lift his head," says one, and the two nearest the head raise it gently; at the movement there is a feeble stirring of the frame, a twitching of the lips, then they open, and there is a fluttering of the lids above the bruised and blood-blinded eyes.

"Tell—" They bend lower to catch the next syllable, but it is long in coming, and the breath is drawn in painful gasps.

"Tell—curse him—tell—*Bruce*," a gasp and a horrible struggle. "Tell—it—was—" the head falls back, another gasp, a sigh; "*Bruce!*" he whispers again, and is dead.

When they are sure that it *is* death, they lower the head gently, and rising, confront each other, standing about the body, the two men, Morse and Redding, at either side of the head, and Deering, the bell-ringer, near the feet.

It is a strange picture; the three men, gentlemen evidently, are in evening dress. Morse, tall and pale, his light topcoat buttoned across his shoulders, with the empty sleeves flapping as he moves; Redding wearing his loosely thrown back from his broad chest, where a big *boutonnière* still blooms unwithered. And Deering?—Bruce Deering?—the man who was first to give the alarm, in the way long in use in Pomfret, he stood at the dead man's feet, hatless, and without the jaunty topcoat which had swung from his arm when he walked away from Captain Frazier's banquet, less than half-an-hour ago, bidding those who loitered behind a light and laughing good-morning, but the *boutonnière* hangs, a crushed fragment, from his coat lapel; there is blood upon the hand that falls open at his side, and smears of blood, like the print of fingers, across his handsome face. Both the others start at the sight: they are young men, all, and friends.

"Bruce!" cries Redding, and points to the ghastly stains.

Bruce Deering looks down at the splashes upon his white linen. "Good heavens!" he cries, "that man has *marked* me!" He begins to look about him hastily. And, even as he speaks, they hear the sound of fast approaching feet.

"Bruce," says Redding quickly, "you must cover *that!*" and he begins to draw off his topcoat.

But Morse is before him; in a flash he has loosed the button of his hanging outer covering, and is holding it out to his friend.

"Quick," he says, "button it up to the chin! *We'll* see you out of this, old man! Reddy, give him your hat."

Redding takes off the soft slouch hat he wears, and himself adjusts it upon Deering's head.

"There, Bruce," he says, "keep it so; keep in the shadow, and watch your chance to get at the water-cooler, or out to the trough at the corner. Hark!"

There are feet in the hall outside; and, in a moment more, John Redding is at the door, saying to the group outside,

"Gentlemen, neighbours, come in, slowly—carefully; a dead man lies close against this door. There has been murder done here this night."

Half-a-dozen men file in through the partly closed door with its ghastly obstruction behind it, and John Redding heaves a sigh of relief as he sees, among them, Stairs, Pomfret's solitary night watchman. There is a chorus of horror-stricken exclamations, and then Redding makes himself heard.

"You can all see what has happened," he says sharply. "Someone has attacked the bank and killed Matchin. He has just breathed his last. We chanced to be the first here, on our way home from Captain Frazier's supper, and Deering rang the bell; there was no time to lose; —there, Wiggins, don't *touch* him; he must not be stirred until the coroner comes. And—Stairs, you must take charge here, and don't let another soul in until Liscom comes, and Mr. Baird!—someone must go after them!"

He turns quickly toward Deering. "Bruce," he says, "come with me; *you* are really the best man to go to Baird's, and I'll go with you. This place has given me a horror."

Bruce Deering starts from his place near a shuttered window like one aroused from a dream, as Redding comes toward him. He moves a step forward, then stops, and looks straight into the face of his friend.

"Someone must give chase," he says with sudden energy; "the assassin is not far away: he went out there;" pointing to a door at the side of the room.

One of the men, who had been bending over poor Joe Matchin's fast-stiffening body, comes suddenly to his feet.

"Which way?" he asks, hurriedly. "There'll be plenty here in half a minute—hear them! We'll run him down! Which way?"

"The Avenue." Deering raises his arm and points eastward.

Quick as thought, John Redding seizes the uplifted arm and pulls it through his own. "Come," he says, "Wells is right, we must *act*, and to the purpose! We are for Liscom and Baird. Wells, get men and lights, and beat the Avenue and towards the woods. Stairs, if I were you, I would send a man with a horse after Sheriff Carton. Come, Deering."

As they pass through the narrow exit which Stairs is guarding with much care, a second group of men enter the outer hall, and the leader is the clergyman of St. Mark's. The place is in darkness, but for the faint light from behind the door, and the tall dominie comes into personal collision with Deering.

"Your pardon," he says, and then adds quickly, "What is it?"

"Murder," cuts in John Redding. "We're after Baird and the

coroner. Go in, doctor, and help Stairs to keep order." Then as the clergyman passes in, he calls back as he catches again at Deering's arm, "Stairs, you had better light those hall lamps."

More men are coming up the short flight of steps, and as they come out from the entrance, someone just in front strikes a parlour match and flashes it directly in Bruce Deering's face; the next instant it is dashed from his hand, and something comes into violent collision with him.

"Oh! beg pahdon, I'm sure," says this person. "It's so deuced dark in there."

"That's Morse," whispers Redding to his companion as they hasten out to the street. And then he calls in a lower tone, "Morse."

"Yes—wait." Morse comes close and puts his hand upon Deering's arm. "Move on a pace, boys," he says, "we can't stop but a moment. Quick, tell me, what shall I say for—for all of us? There'll be a hundred questions asked before you get back."

They are silent a moment, then, "Say as little as possible," answers Redding. "Say we were coming home—Bruce a little in advance—Bruce heard a cry for help—eh, Bruce?"

"No, wrong. I heard a sound first like a heavy fall, and then looking toward the door, saw a glimmer of light, and went toward it. I heard the cry—"

"That's enough," breaks in Redding; "someone's coming. We can't confer here. See, Morse! Bruce, a little ahead, heard a cry, rushed in, caught a glimpse of a fleeing man, saw that door was open—we all rushed in, found Matchin breathing his last; Bruce ran to ring bell. Bruce, how—"

"Matchin was sexton," said Deering, a touch of coldness in his tone. "I took the—key. Redding, I think *I* had better go back."

"You are *mad*, man! Morse, go back; *you* can get through it."

"I'll try," says Morse, and just as two more come breathlessly up, he dashes out, joins them, and, before they can so much as peer through the darkness at the two retreating figures, he is telling them the meaning of the midnight alarm, and hurrying them toward the bank.

"Now, Bruce," says Redding gently, with almost a tremor in his tone, "we *must* have a word together; come over to the church, we can talk there—behind the pillars."

They cross the street in silence, and standing back in the blackness of the deep porch, Bruce Deering puts out his hand, and touching his friend, draws close beside him, speaking in a low tone.

"John," he says, "I see my position, and know how much worse it might be, but for you and Morse. As God hears me, this is all I can say of this horrible affair: I was walking slowly, and something brought my uncle before my mind; I began thinking of him and his journey. You know he has gone to New York?"

"Yes," murmured Redding.

"But you may not know that he went to consult a physician. Whether he ever returns to business, as an active agent, will depend upon the verdict of this man. I was thinking of the blow it would be to him if he were ordered to give up his active life; and, thinking

thus, I came to a halt, just at the little bridge, and sat a few moments upon the rail pondering ; then I went on, slowly, and stopped again at the bank, thinking how he had built the place and made it prosperous. If I had not been standing still I don't think I could have heard a sound from inside ; but, standing there in the perfect silence, it seemed to me that I heard something like a fall, and then a groan. I started forward, and reached the corner, where I saw, as you saw when you came up, that little gleam of light. What followed was like a flash. I sprang toward the door and was instantly in contact with a man. Grappling with him, his open hand struck my face, in the dark, and I felt the moisture on my cheek ; I think I might have held him, but I heard a second groan, and a faint cry, and let go my hold upon the fellow to rush in. Joe lay upon the floor, not where we found him, but near the cage, or rather between it and the vault. It flashed upon me then that the sound I had heard outside was *not* a fall, but the heavy closing of the vault door. Matchin was breathing short and quick, and seemed insensible ; I tried to rouse him to speak, but it seemed useless, and suddenly it struck me that the quickest way to bring help would be the old way of rousing the town—to ring the bell. I knew where Matchin always kept the key of the church, and took it. If I had guessed that you two were to follow me so quickly, I should hardly have ventured upon so general an alarm."

"I see ! I see it all ! and now—Bruce, first of all, we must remove those blood stains, and—where did you leave your coat?"

"In the church, I think. In fact, I'm sure."

"We must get it. There must be no sign of confusion. Someone may find your coat, or recognise Morse's garment upon you ; besides, it's not a fit. I have matches, although I have not seen fit to use them before. Let's go inside."

They are close to the heavy door, and Deering essays to open it.

"Strange," he says. "I am sure—almost, that I did not lock—did not even *close* that door."

"Is it locked?"

"Yes."

"And the key?"

"Not here."

"Think, man, you are a methodical fellow, even in great excitement—it would be like you to stop and make secure a door which you had opened ; you must have locked it, and, in the flurry of meeting us, have dropped the key from your hand."

"Perhaps," Deering says doubtfully, "but I can't recall it. I flung my coat down recklessly, I can't say where, or into what. But the key—" He breaks off, and Redding stands for a moment listening.

"I don't hear anyone stirring outside," he says finally. "They are all hovering over that poor piece of clay, I suppose ! I'm going to strike a match." He strikes it at the word, and paces to and fro across the broad portico, with the little light held out before him.

"Ah !" he says suddenly, and throws down his expiring match as he stands beside the hand-rail upon the lowest step. In a moment he is back at Deering's side.

"Here is your coat, old man," he says ; "you *must* have been

muddled to fancy you had dropped it *inside*." He pressed the light, soft garment into hands that were almost nerveless. "Come now," he says, "let us get on. You'll get straight after a little brisk pacing. This sort of thing is apt to turn a man around, and mix up his ideas; *you'll* come out all right enough; but it will be bad for the fellow that killed poor Matchin, if he's caught by Wells and his mob *to-night!* Now for Coroner Liscom. I would not have taken even this brief moment to hear your story, if there had been the glimmer of a hope for Matchin; but I'm doctor enough, myself, to know that he drew his last breath with your name upon his lips."

"True," sighed Deering, "and woe is me! I wish it had been some other name than mine!"

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST STONE.

THE Reverend Paul Arden was a "popular minister" in the best sense of the word: eloquent in the pulpit, genial, benign, humane. He preached a gospel of love and duty, and illustrated it in his life. In such a scene as this Dr. Arden was always "the right man in the right place;"—not a man in Pomfret but believed in the pastor of St. Mark's. None but respected him.

"Ah, doctor, but I'm glad you've come!" said Stairs, making way for him; "you're the *one* man to keep all as it should be. It's murder we have here, sir; poor Matchin's been done to death, and nobody knows by whom."

The clergyman moved to the side of the dead man, removing his hat as he stooped and took the lifeless hand, holding it for a moment as if to assure himself that it was lifeless, and replacing it tenderly, reverently.

Then for a moment he stood erect, but with head bare and bowed, and those who had followed him trod softly, and, standing a little aloof, spoke to each other in low tones or whispers.

Presently he moved back a pace and turned toward Stairs.

"What do you know of this?" he asked.

"A'most nothing, sir. I believe Mr. Redding, Mr. Morse, and Mr. Bruce Deering heard something and ran in." As he spoke, Morse reentered, and Mr. Arden held out his hand to him—they were very good friends. The two men Morse had encountered upon leaving Redding and Bruce Deering were close behind him, and after them came a number of others. There were now fully twenty men in the room. As Mr. Arden was about to question Morse, the man Wells came awkwardly forward from the far corner where he had been conferring in whispers with two men as big and muscular in appearance as himself.

"Dominie," he said, "we were a-talking, jest as you came in, about startin' out to ketch the feller that did this piece of work. Bruce Deering says he went down the Avenue tor'ds the east; would ye recommend us to trail him that a-way?"

"Yes," said the clergyman promptly, "that way, and *at once*. Mr. Deering is not a man likely to lose his head, or make a mis-statement in such a case as this."

The three men exchanged glances, and without a word, or any indication of a desire for other company, started to leave the place. At the door Wells turned.

"I sh'd recommend," he said, "that some more of ye bunch together and work around west-ways. If that feller ain't had more'n half-an-hour's start he ain't got fur off, and if he ain't got a horse, or ain't crawled in som'ers, somebody may dig him out. The more parties out, the more chance to ketch him. We're goin' straight down the Avenoo, an' our party's big enough to ketch one man, an' *hold* him too. Come on, fellers, we've lost time enough!" And the three men went out at a very brisk pace indeed.

Half-a-dozen men, stimulated by the speech of Wells, followed his party out into the street, but the rest gathered closer about Morse and the clergyman, eager to hear what might be said.

"It's little enough I can tell you," Morse said in answer to a dozen questions from as many mouths; "we had been out together at Captain Frazier's—and Deering left the house a little in advance of us. When he got here he heard sounds in the bank, and before he could realise their meaning, a man rushed past him and away; then he heard a groan and ran up the steps; the door was open and he—he gave the alarm. He didn't know we were so close behind, and to get help in the quickest way he ran across and rang the bell." He paused. Several more people had entered; Stairs had lighted the front of the building, and the crowd was thickening. Morse had stopped, hoping that the new-comers, who were asking many questions, and crowding about the dead, would make a diversion, for Stairs had begun to repeat as much as he knew of the story; but it was not to be.

From among those who were grouped together in the corner farthest from Mr. Arden and Morse, a small man with drooping shoulders, hair and whiskers of a carroty red, and a wide mouth filled with big yellow teeth, made doubly prominent by their garniture of tobacco stains, pushed his way forward until he stood close beside Morse.

"Mr. Morse," he began in a fawning, oily manner, "may I jest ast a question?"

"Certainly," said Morse a trifle stiffly.

"Wal now—when you gentlemen came in here, did you find Joe Matchin a-layin' jest like he is *now?*"

"Just the same."

"No one has been let to touch him; not to move him, that is," said Stairs promptly, "since *I've* been here. Nor they *won't* be, till Mr. Baird comes down!"

"Wal then," resumed the red-headed man, "what *I* want to know is—*how* did Mr. Bruce Deering come to have them *bloodstains* on his *face* and on his *hands?*"

There was a stir among the men crowded close about this central group, and the eyes of the clergyman met those of Morse, and detected the trouble the young man could not, for a moment, hide.

Then the clergyman turned his fine eyes upon the man who had thrown this startling sentence into their midst, and his look and his tone had grown suddenly stern as he said,

"Shame upon the man who wantonly throws doubt and suspicion upon one whose whole life has been blameless, and who is not present to speak in his own behalf. Shame upon you, Jonas Wiggins; malice brings its own punishment!"

Jonas Wiggins drew back a pace, but he was not a man to be easily put down.

"I ain't a-tryin' to throw suspicion upon anybody that don't deserve it," he said, reddening darkly; "but we'll all be called on to tell what we know, I s'pose, and I seen the blood on Deering's face with my own eyes, and Finch here tells me there was blood on his hands too."

"Wiggins," interrupted the night watchman, "you hold your tongue till you're asked to talk."

"Gentlemen," spoke up Morse, "I think I did not say that Mr. Deering was the first person to reach Matchin, and, thinking him still living, and in need of help, he tried to lift him."

But Wiggins was not yet suppressed. "I don't see," he said sulkily, "how *that* is goin' to account for them marks across his *face*."

Before the murmurs called out by this shrewd retort had spent themselves, the stately clergyman lifted his hand in a gesture which quickly commanded silence.

"My brothers," he said, "we are here together to-night confronted by death, face to face with crime, surrounded by mystery, and strong men though we are, we stand thus powerless, awaiting a leader; awaiting light upon our darkness,—and yet there is near us a Leader ever present upon whom we need not wait. Let us bow our heads. Let us call upon Him now."

He moved nearer the body of the dead man, and kneeling beside it, uttered, in low tones, a brief and fitting prayer for the dead and for the living; for help and for wisdom, for light and for patience, charity, and calm judgment.

As he knelt thus, one after another, hats came off, and heads were bowed. Only Wiggins and the man Finch remained covered; and even Wiggins had made a late, half-way gesture towards his frowzy hat. When the clergyman arose from his knees, John Redding and Bruce Deering were standing in the doorway, and behind them were the coroner and Mr. Baird.

CHAPTER III.

"HE ACCUSED YOU!"

JAMES BAIRD was a man of authority, and prompt to act and think. He was the partner of Lysander Deering, the absent uncle of Bruce Deering, and the Vice-President of the Pomfret Bank. He had heard what was known of Joe Matchin's death before reaching the scene of the tragedy, and he had not been long upon the ground before the

bank was cleared of the superfluous onlookers, who went out promptly at the word of command, because they *knew* James Baird; but went reluctantly, nevertheless, and lingered outside while the early morning hours wore away, breaking up into groups, and making up now for any restraint they had felt in the presence of death and authority.

Jonas Wiggins was one of the last to go, and the most unwilling. He believed himself to be a witness of value, and he did not pass through the doorway, which Stairs still guarded, without getting near enough to Coroner Liscom to let him know that *he* should not shrink from his plain duty as an important witness, "whatever some folks might say."

The crowd outside rapidly increased in numbers, but it kept its place, shrinking and swelling from time to time, and manufacturing a growing sentiment which, had mob law been the fashion in quiet and well-ordered Pomfret, might have made it unsafe for Bruce Deering to come out alone upon the now well-lit, terrace-like piazza, which ran across the entire front of the bank building.

Lysander Flood Deering was a man of mark in Pomfret: an old resident, a man of wealth, and reckoned more or less eccentric; and Bruce Deering, his nephew, who had grown to manhood beneath the banker's roof, reared and educated upon equal terms with the banker's only son, was, of necessity, being "one of the Deerings," a man of mark also, though somewhat less in degree. All Pomfret knew the Deerings; and Pomfret, though a town of wealth and weight in the county and the country around it, was not so large as to prevent personal matters, not of a strictly secret nature, from becoming common property, when these same matters concerned families and individuals of eminence, such as the Deerings assuredly were.

And now, as the crowd outside the bank conversed in groups, with growing interest and excitement, it was of the Deerings, quite as much as of dead Joe Matchin that they talked.

They were awed into momentary silence when the city marshal and the full corps of the Pomfret police came down Main Street at a double quick, and were at once admitted to the bank, where one of the offices at the front had been opened and lighted for their temporary occupation; and they were thoroughly surprised when the whole fire department, uniformed, but without their hose and ladders, followed soon. And they were somewhat chagrined when, less than ten minutes after the arrival of the last-named body of men, the side door, which led directly into the bank proper, opened silently, and police and firemen filed out quietly, and rapidly scattered in various directions, each man deaf to questions and salutations; and more than half of them were well away upon their mission before the groups that had placed themselves as near as possible to the front and the big portico were aware of their exit.

"Wal!" complained Jonas Wiggins, who was the centre of a goodly group of kindred spirits, "they're takin' a good deal of pains to fool each other, or us, or somebody! D'ye s'pose if one of *us* fellers u'd a made his appearance here to-night, with bloody hands and face, they'd a sent the perlice out scourin' the town, an' let *us* jest walk away as we pleased? No, sir! not any! It's all right for the dominie to preach

at a feller for jest speakin' his mind, as looked to him to be a plain out duty, but until Mr. Bruce Deering explains *how* he got that bloody face, I'll say, for one, Look to home for the man yer wantin', Mr. Baird and company!"

"That's so," chimed in the man Finch. "But Deering's an aristocrat, ye see, Jonas, and that makes a durn sight o' differ."

"Yer right; it does! but there's more than them blood marks that makes things point to Deering."

"How's that, Wiggins?" asks a voice from the rear of the group.

"Wal, ye must know, if ye're well acquainted around here. I s'pose ye remember Matchin's gal, Rose?—his niece she was."

"Yes, yes!" from one.

"That's so!" from another.

"Wal, I guess some of us kin recollect that when Rose run away from home, Matchin didn't make no bones of sayin' it was to Bruce Deering she had gone."

There was a chorus of exclamations, and then the voice that had last interrogated Wiggins spoke again.

"I thought that was a little mixed."

"No, sir! not any! Somebody *tried* to start that kind of talk—Bruce hisself most like; but it wouldn't go. Holbrook Deering hadn't no eyes for sech a girl as Rose Matchin, though she *was* a little beauty. Holbrook Deering has too much of the real old Deering stock in him to stoop for his company! Why, Moses and Aaron! It's well known that Joe Matchin has vowed to git square with Bruce Deering more than once; *I've* heard him myself."

"So have I!" cried two or three voices together.

"'Course!" cried Wiggins, his voice rising in malicious triumph; "and didn't Matchin vow that he'd leave the bank—him that's been there nigh on to twenty years, an' trusted like one o' the firm, because old man Deering talked of puttin' in Bruce Deering cashier? They say," he added, "that *that's* why Deering wouldn't go in; that he didn't dare!"

"Bah!" spoke a new voice. "I guess Bruce Deering don't scare worth much, whatever he's done. There ain't much white feather in *him*." The speaker came nearer as he continued his speech. "I ain't sayin' that Bruce Deering ain't *guilty*, and I ain't sayin' he *is*. But I don't go in fur kickin' at a man jest because he's down, and I don't happen ter like him. An' this I *do* say, Deering's as sharp as a brier, he's a lawyer, and a good one. And he ain't the chap to kill a man, and then go sailin' out in public with blood all over him; as fur's that blood's concerned, it wouldn't go as fur as from here to the meetin' house with *me*, if *I* was on a jury to try him!"

"I guess you won't be on no jury, Tom Wells, after sich a rigmarole as *that*," retorted Wiggins with a vicious snarl.

"Wal," drawled his opponent, "they'll be most *sure* to want to make a foreman out of *you*, Jonas; they allus look sharp after a man that 'ud ruther hang a poor feller than not, to set on a jury in these 'ere law courts;" and the speaker uttered a short laugh, and sauntered away from the group.

Meantime, in the room where poor Joe Matchin lay upon his hard

death-couch, Mr. Baird and Coroner Liscom were holding an informal inquiry.

After the exodus of the throng, which had quite filled the room, and threatened soon to overflow it, as well as the hall beyond, there remained only ten men. Mr. Baird had been quick to name those whom he wished to stay.

"This place must be cleared *at once*," he had said, as soon as he had exchanged a word with the clergyman, and bent, for a silent moment, over the dead. "Stairs, you will see to it. Doctor Arden, we want the support of *your* presence—your advice, too, perhaps. Liscom, of course; Messrs. Redding, Morse, and Deering, too, can give us some information." He glanced about him, his keen, grey eyes passing swiftly from face to face, and, after a moment, named three others. "Krouse—Hennis—Bagwell, will you three oblige me by staying? I may need your assistance." The three men manifested their willingness by coming forward and taking a position near Coroner Liscom, and Mr. Baird swept the room with another quick glance. "That will be enough," he said. "Gentlemen, oblige me by passing out as quickly, and as quietly as possible; only *one* at a time,—and mind there is no crowding about that door. Stairs, look to it. Don't move it; not an inch; they must go out as they came in,—but quicker." To make all sure, he advanced and took up a position beside Stairs. "Now, gentlemen," he said, "be quick; our time is passing." They began to file out quietly for the most part, just a few uttering some half-smothered complaint, or making a last effort to get a nearer view of the dead man behind the screening door, until only half-a-dozen men remained, and these, grouped about Jonas Wiggins, seemed not inclined to move.

"My friends," said Mr. Baird's stern voice, "either you will go out *now*, at *once*, or you will stay here and be *put* out, and, perhaps, cared for, afterwards, by the police. *I* am *master* here; understand that!"

The men slunk away, muttering anathemas that were not distinguishable, nor meant to be; and when Stairs had shut the door and secured it, Mr. Baird began, like the born commander that he was, addressing himself to the clergyman and coroner especially.

"Now, gentlemen, let me inform you at once, that you may be at ease upon these points, that my first act, upon hearing from these two friends," nodding toward Redding and Deering, "that Matchin had been killed, was, to send my own man, with a swift horse, after Sheriff Carton. It is just possible, the night being so clear and still, that he may have heard the bell our friend, Deering, was so thoughtful as to ring. *I* had heard it, and was prepared to set out with them at once. But Carton lives so far, and he might not hasten, even if he heard the alarm, and thought it meant fire, as he would, if he knew it meant murder I think we may count upon seeing him soon."

"That was a wise forethought," said Doctor Arden.

"So it seemed to me. Next, as it was but little out of our way, we stopped long enough to tell the fire lads, who were getting ready to set out, while waiting to learn their destination; and they volunteered, to a man, to turn out and join in the search for the assassin. Then we

roused up the marshal, who had not so much as heard the bell, and he will be here with almost the entire force very soon, thanks to our liberal telephone system."

"I call that very expeditious," commented young Morse, who had drawn on his topcoat and buttoned it up to the neck in imitation of his two friends. "It is not an easy task to search for a fugitive, escaping, or in hiding, on a dark night like this; but it would be harder yet, if we wait for morning with all the advantage of time that gives him. The marshal is arranging for a dozen good saddle horses at this moment, and as many men will be mounted and sent out in various directions as fast as possible. If the fellow drives or is on horseback, he must keep to the highways; if he is on foot he may elude the night search, but daylight ought to find him so well surrounded that escape will not be easy. Though, to guide this search, we only know that the assassin went east on the Avenue, taking to the middle of the street. He has more than half-an-hour's start."

While Mr. Baird had been speaking, the coroner had been kneeling beside the dead man, examining the body with great care. When he ceased, the other looked up and said,

"He has not been dead an hour." He arose from his knees and turned toward the others. "As nearly as I can judge, from so brief an examination, he was killed by blows upon the head; *heavy* blows, dealt by some blunt instrument; an iron bar, probably. He *could* not have lived many moments after those blows were dealt." He turned toward the three young men. "Did not I understand that you young gentlemen heard his last groans? How *was* it?"

As Deering was about to reply, Mr. Baird interposed.

"I was about to suggest," he said, "that we briefly review events, so far as they are known. We shall not, of course, hold anything like a formal examination before to-morrow." He turned and addressed young Deering. "Mr. Deering, will you tell us your experience once again? To some it will be for the first time."

If Bruce Deering had been agitated at first, he was calm enough now. He repeated his story very much as he had told it to his friend under the porch of St. Mark's. When he had finished, the coroner asked:—

"And had you no glimpse of the man? No hint of his identity?"

"We were in total darkness," replied Deering. "We met at the foot of the steps; I think the fellow must have unbolted the side door, fearing to go out at the other, it being the more exposed of the two; the glimmer of light shining through, it might have betrayed him. Of course, once he was outside, the Avenue was his safest way of retreat; the trees make a dense shade, increasing the darkness, and affording shelter should he encounter any late passers, like ourselves, for instance," nodding towards his two friends. "I must have turned the corner just before he came out from the door. He only left one mark by which to identify him."

"And that?" queried the coroner.

Deering unbuttoned his topcoat and threw it back so that all might see. "He left his finger-marks upon my linen," he said, "and upon my face and hands. He first touched my hand. I think it was his

first intimation that anyone was near him ; and, almost instantly, I felt his hand upon my breast and face. I held my topcoat upon one arm, and grappled with him with the other ; but, at that instant, I heard the groan from the bank, and I ran up the steps, conscious, through all my haste, of his running footsteps upon the flags outside. The fellow made no attempt to grapple with me. He was writhing out of my grasp when I heard Matchin groan and released him."

"Do you think," asked Mr. Baird, "that he tried, purposely, to mark you with his bloody hand?"

"That was not my idea then, nor is it now ; I think he was trying to identify me by touch."

"Ah!" the coroner looked up quickly. He had again bent over the body upon the floor, but he now moved toward Deering with a new look of interest upon his face. "To identify *you!*" he repeated. "Mr. Deering, have you any idea *who* the man was?"

"That was impossible, he did not speak, and I grasped him by the shoulder for only an instant. He was not quite so tall as myself, I should think ; and his coat was fine and soft to the touch. I can say no more."

"And you? Did *you* speak? Did he hear your voice?"

Deering was silent a moment.

"I think it likely. I think I uttered some exclamation. I can't remember just what ; or if it were a word at all. Yes, I *think* he heard my voice."

Coroner Liscom came closer.

"Allow me," he said, and he bent forward to scrutinise the stains upon the young man's white shirt-front ; "they are finger-marks," he said, "without a doubt. And the marks upon your face, Mr. Deering?"

"I washed them off at the corner," replied Deering, "from my face and from my hands ; I could hardly be required to retain *such* stains upon my person?"

"And this?" the coroner touched the stained shirt-front.

"That I could not spare time to change."

"When you do change it, do not let it be washed, if you please. It may be useful."

"It shall be turned over to you, sir, at once." There was a hint of constraint in question and answer, and John Redding, an anxious listener, drew a sigh of relief when he heard footsteps without, and Marshal Way and his forces were admitted, one by one, by Stairs.

When they were inside, and standing in orderly ranks, the coroner turned to Mr. Baird.

"This body has lain here long enough," he said. "I have examined it sufficiently as it lies ; let some of these men bring a table from the office there, and we will place it more suitably, so that it need not be disturbed until after the inquest, which will be early to-morrow."

The change was promptly made, and then, for a short time, the coroner and Mr. Baird were busy giving orders to the police, and afterwards to the newly-arrived firemen.

When this had been arranged to the satisfaction of all, Mr. Baird turned to the three men who had so far been silent lookers-on.

"Krouse," he said, "I am going to ask you, and Bagwell, and Hennis, to stay here and guard this body until you shall be relieved, which shall be in time for your breakfasts, all. It's useless to try to do more here now than has been done; but, at the first gleam of daylight, I want you inside, and Stairs without, to redouble your vigilance. There has been no search made about the premises, and it is better so. I am well satisfied that no inquiring mind was awakened to the propriety of examining things, with a promiscuous crowd at hand. Stairs, I want you to patrol this building outside, unceasingly, and with a good light at every corner. You will utilise the lamps, all, or any of them, from all the rooms; and, if you choose, take Bagwell out with you. Be sure that no one approaches the building, *no one!* and that no one enters. Do not disturb things inside; and, as daylight comes, note well the appearance of the floor, and walls, especially about the vault door. I trust you—all of you; and I think you understand me."

Each of the four assured him of their willingness to carry out his instructions, and the banker then turned toward the others.

"Gentlemen," he said, "we can do no good by remaining here and discussing this matter further; we *might* do harm; until after the inquest it is better that there be no semblance of private investigation or discussion; *afterwards*," he glanced from one to the other until his eyes rested upon Bruce Deering, "if it is needful we will confer together again." He approached the table, and, for a moment, stood with head reverently bowed above the dead face; then turning, "We can do nothing more for poor Matchin now," he said, "and we leave him in safe and kindly hands. Gentlemen, come; we will meet here in the morning; at what hour, Liscom?"

"At nine o'clock," said the coroner promptly. "And, Mr. Deering, —remember—*your* evidence will be most valuable."

Doctor Liscom lived upon the Avenue down which the murderer had disappeared, but near its western end; and he parted from the others at the bank's entrance, going his homeward way alone; while the others went together, northward, upon Main Street, passing the church, and walking in silence, Mr. Baird and the clergyman together, the three young men close behind them.

When they arrived at the second cross street, Bruce Deering paused, and said in a low tone—

"Gentlemen, will you stop here for a word?" They halted promptly, and came close around him.

"Will you all come up to my room for ten minutes?" Deering asked; "there is something I wish you, each, to hear; and I do not care to trust the darkness of this street. Since my uncle's departure I have occupied rooms in our office building; it is only a block from here. Will you come?" There was a strong note of appeal in his voice, and Mr. Arden answered for them all.

"By all means!" he said cordially, "that is—will we not, friends?"

"Lead on," said the banker, and they silently turned into Laurel Street, and were soon in a large and comfortable bachelor apartment, where, in the outer room, a drop light upon a large table was burning dimly.

The clergyman was prompt to seat himself near the table, and the

other guests silently followed his example, but Deering, after he had turned on the light, and removed his hat from a fine and ample forehead, moved away from the others, and stood facing them.

"Gentlemen," he began, "you are all, I sincerely believe, my friends; you have known me from boyhood. I do not feel like separating from you to-night, without telling you what was omitted by my friends, here, out of kindness to me; and by myself, from—from cowardice perhaps."

"*No!*" broke in John Redding, over whose countenance a look of understanding had suddenly spread. "Out of consideration for *us*, gentlemen! because the course we took would make speech on *his* part seem ungrateful."

"I appreciated your motives, be sure of that," said Deering. "But it must rest with these other friends, whether we did right in keeping back anything. Mr. Arden, Mr. Baird, when we three entered the bank we found Joe Matchin lying by the door, just where you saw him; he was *not* dead when we tried to lift him, but he was breathing his last. We saw him die; and, *we heard his dying words.* Before God, I believe that he *tried* to tell us *who was his slayer.*"

"What!" Mr. Baird sprang to his feet. "And you did not tell us!"

"One moment, please. I do not believe I can trust myself to speak the words he uttered; I am not sure that I should not make them even *more* damning than they were meant to be!" He turned toward John Redding.

"Redding, tell them Matchin's last words."

John Redding arose in his turn, and raised his hand as if to take an oath.

"Before God," he said, solemnly, "I do *not* believe that Joe Matchin meant to accuse! His words were disjointed fragments of, not one sentence, but, it would seem, of several! *I will not repeat them.*"

The two young men faced each other silently for a long moment; all were now upon their feet.

Deering turned towards Morse.

"Charlie," he said, and the one word was an appeal.

But Morse shook his head.

"I'd sooner cut off my hand," he groaned, and turned away his face.

Bruce Deering drew himself suddenly erect.

"Then I *must*," he said firmly, but with no sign of anger. "Gentlemen, when we lifted Joe Matchin he was gasping, and his words were uttered at intervals, between tortured efforts to say more—to say other words, or so it seemed; but the words he *said* were these: '*Tell*,'—a gasp—'*curse him*,'—another gasp—'Bruce.' Then after a moment of struggling, '*Tell—it was—Bruce.*'"

John Redding groaned aloud; and Mr. Baird sank back in his seat.

"Merciful Heavens!" he cried. "Bruce Deering! *He has accused you!*"

Even as he spoke, Mr. Arden seized his hat from the table, sprang toward Deering, and caught his hand in both his own.

"Stand steadfast," he whispered. "I will see you again soon. I must leave you now in haste." And with a bound, agile, graceful, and swift, plainly indicating some strong and sudden excitement, he flung open the door, and they heard him running down the stairs.

"What does it mean?" cried Mr. Baird, suddenly coming to his feet again.

"I think I can tell." It was Redding who spoke. "I fancied when we left the bank that someone followed us. Probably Mr. Arden has heard the eavesdropper outside."

"Then let us follow him!" cried Morse. But the banker threw up his hand, saying, as he went and closed the still half open door:

"By no means! Arden knows what he is doing, depend upon it."

CHAPTER IV.

BEFORE THE INQUEST.

AFTER the clergyman's hasty departure, the four men who were left behind stood looking from one to another, all of them silent, until John Redding's voice broke the unpleasant stillness. As he stepped forward and stood directly in front of the stern-faced banker—

"Mr. Baird," he said firmly, "I was an idiot not to tell you the truth as it *is!* I might have known that, rather than seem to spare himself, Deering would put the very worst construction upon the words of that dying man. Joe Matchin's words *were* broken; and I do not believe that any two were meant to be connected; *I* could interpret his words in but one way."

"And that way?"

"As God hears me, I believe that Matchin made a last effort to utter *two* sentences; the first, a message, which, I think, was meant *for* Bruce. The *last* I think he meant to be a denunciation; and he called upon Bruce Deering *for help,—not* to denounce him."

The banker's face had been very grave, and it did not relax its gravity, as, without uttering comment or reply, he turned to Charles Morse.

"Was that *your* idea?" he asked.

Morse came forward in his turn and stood where the full blaze of the drop light lit up his fine and delicate face. He was the direct opposite of big, bluff, outspoken John Redding, and he was, perhaps, for this very reason, his most intimate friend.

For a moment Morse stood thus, silent; and in the interval the banker spoke again.

"Mr. Redding is a loyal friend, and he might even be capable, in an emergency, of telling the truth in a partisan spirit; or of giving it a tone too favourable perhaps." Redding started forward, but the banker went on with his eyes upon the face of Morse, "But *you*, Morse, will, I believe, weigh your words, and when you reply you will speak conscientiously, however reluctantly it may be."

Morse bowed and his sensitive face bore a look of relief.

"Then, Mr. Baird," he said, "if that is your opinion, I am glad to answer you as I may. When I heard poor Matchin's dying words I did not interpret them as my friend did; I am slower witted than he, although, hearing him now, and recalling the scene, I can see how very probable it is that he has interpreted them correctly. For myself, I could extract *no* meaning from them, further than the thought that Matchin was dazed, and, perhaps, had recognised Deering, and was trying to tell him something—to speak to him. But this I *can* say, *with conviction!—Bruce Deering is not an assassin!*"

"Thank you, Morse," said Deering quickly; but he stood still in his place, a little removed from the others, and did not proffer his hand.

Mr. Baird resumed the chair he had at first occupied, and let his head rest upon his hand. Bruce motioned the others to seats, and himself began to pace to and fro the length of the room; then, for many minutes, all remained silent. Finally Mr. Baird lifted his head.

"Mr. Deering," he said, and his voice had lost its sternness, "I think that we will do very well to ignore this revelation you have made, at least for the present. I will speak to Mr. Arden at once—before the inquiry opens—and I will not speak of it to our coroner. We could not ask *him* to shirk a duty of so solemn a nature; and he would not if we did. I will tell you now why I sent my man after Carton by the upper road. I had written, in my room, immediately after hearing your brief story, and before I finished dressing, a telegram which Hicks was to hand to the night-operator; I have sent to the city *for a detective.*"

"Jove!" broke out Redding, "you thought of everything."

"Not quite. The man cannot get here before ten o'clock if he starts without a moment of delay. He *may* not come until noon. Liscom understands this, but I have no idea of letting it become generally known. We shall put off our inquiry until he comes, and has had time to take a good look about the premises; now you may see why I was so emphatic about keeping people out. I only regret that so many got in; although, of course, that could not be helped as matters then were. Deering, the best thing you could possibly have done for yourself and for all concerned, was to ring that bell." He rose abruptly and held out his hand to Bruce Deering. "It will soon be morning," he said, and a smile lighted his severe old face. "There, my boy, accept those words as a prophecy; and take my hand. It will take more than I have heard to-night to make me doubt you. We must separate now, and let me recommend you all to try and rest if you do not sleep; keep John Redding with you, Deering, he is the king of optimists; and you, Morse, your walk is too long, come home with me."

. . . . . .

At eight o'clock in the morning, Mr. Baird was at his post in one of the private offices of the bank. The watchers, within and without, had been changed, and the large, and fast increasing crowd about the street corner was rigidly held at a distance by a dozen well-selected special police.

The Pomfret Bank, unlike most banks, stood aloof from other buildings, like a dwelling-house, with a neat, low, iron railing enclosing it

on three sides; its front, opening upon the Avenue, being crossed from corner to corner by a wide and well-shaded piazza, where, doubly screened by the row of fine old trees just outside the stone pavement, the occupants of this most homelike bank could take their summer ease at morning and evening.

There was clamour enough, and to spare, outside; but within, Mr. Baird, well-known as a martinet not to be gainsaid, sat and smoked a cigar in silence, the clergyman and the coroner opposite him.

At six o'clock, the erect old banker, after three hours' rest, had stopped his favourite fast-stepping horse before the clergyman's door, to find him alert and just finishing an early breakfast, prepared for him by loving hands in haste; and between his gate and the door of the bank, in spite of Lady Jane's swiftness, the banker had found time to tell him of the determination to suppress for the present Bruce Deering's account of Joe Matchin's dying words.

"It's a merciful thought, my brother," said the good man promptly. "We are apt to be too hasty in condemning under circumstantial evidence. There is time enough—time enough, to blacken the good name of an upright young man. Oh, the pity of it! What will Archibald Deering say if this story must be dragged out?"

"He will never believe it," said the banker, stepping from his waggonette as lightly as he could have done at twenty-five.

The crowd was clamorous about them, and Mr. Baird turned upon them with a few sharp, pointed words, and passed in, between the two guards at the portico entrance. But the clergyman stopped, and addressed them in the spirit of love, of understanding, of forbearance. He told them nothing that they had not already gathered from the guards and from each other, but he left them quieter, and, for a time, more thoughtful.

Then, for two hours they sat, and, from time to time, listened to the reports of the scouts who had been beating the streets and alleys, the woods and fields, the highways and byways about Pomfret. All brought the same report, go where they would, search never so carefully, there was no trace of the fugitive to be found.

"I tell ye what," said Tom Wells, the first to set out, and the last to come in, "*I* don't like the look of it! I warn't so much sirprised when *we* didn't find the cuss; but when I got back and seen how *many* had been on the hunt, though fur that matter we was runnin' into some of 'em every little while, I jest felt took back! I tell ye, Mr. Baird, there never was a town more thurrerly beaten up than this 'ere town was las' night; you wouldn't a thought a *rabbit* could a dodged *all* on us! Yet here *we* are; and here *he* ain't! I tell ye I don't like it! *It don't look square!*"

"What do you mean by that, Wells?" asked Mr. Baird.

"I guess you know what I mean, fast enough," said Wells, with a queer side glance at the banker. "You know I'm an old hunter, sir, and tolable on a trail."

"Capital, Wells, there's no one better."

"Wal, sir, if I *ever* tried, I tried last night; and I gin the others all the helps an' hints I could. There ain't a man knows the outer, the way tracks, an' paths, an' hidden places better than me. An' I tell

ye we ain't missed none of 'em! Consarn the feller! I don't want to insult old Pomfret, but—*I m 'fraid* she's a hidden a black assassin!"

"What! you think he's in hiding in the *town?*"

"I can think nothin' else!"

"Well!" said the banker, "if he's still in Pomfret, I think we may find him."

"Um!" grunted Wells, getting up and shambling toward the door, "I ain't lookin' ter see ye bring him in *terday.*"

"Wells," said the banker quickly, getting up and following him to the door, "my horse is outside, take it and go to my house, you and your men. Get your breakfast—they have orders there to feed all comers—then come back here. You are tired, I know, but you'll find plenty of blankets in the office across the hall, and you can rest there until we want you."

"What is it ye want next, boss?" asked the man unabashed.

"I want you to meet a man whom I expect on one of the trains from eastward. I may want you to help him."

"Umph. That's it! Who is yer man, boss? Is it—" he stopped and favoured the banker with a nod and a mysterious gesture.

Mr. Baird put a hand upon his shoulder. "I can trust *you*, Wells," he said, "but mum's the word. *It's a detective.*"

"G—gash!" ejaculated Wells, and went out without a further word.

. . . . . .

After the arrival of the coroner there was not much conversation in the closed and guarded room, where the three men waited for the coming of the first train from the east. The coroner from time to time jotted down items in a little black note-book, presumably memoranda to be used in the coming examination. The clergyman and Mr. Baird were not talkative. They did not care to open a discussion which might bring the name of Bruce Deering too prominently forward.

As ten o'clock approached there was no perceptible change in the crowd without, for the very good reason that they were not aware of the fact that so important an arrival was now momentarily looked for.

Only the three waiting within grew more alert and a trifle restless, as train time drew near.

"How will your man find his way?" asked the coroner looking at his watch.

"Easily," replied the banker, "I wired them to send one of their best men to Pomfret Bank."

But ten o'clock came and passed, and no stranger applied for admittance. Acting upon instruction, Deering, Redding, and Morse came shortly after ten o'clock, and were conducted through the crowd by Stairs, who was as alert as ever, though sleepless for so many hours.

After some conversation the coroner got up and went to the window.

"They're as numerous as ever," he said, nodding toward the crowd outside. "They look for the inquest to open at any moment, I daresay." He turned back and approached the banker. "We can't open now; at least, it will be as well to wait, I suppose, until after the one o'clock

train comes ; and it's useless for us all to remain here. I'll see if I can't scatter that crowd, or, at least, thin it a bit."

He drew back the bolt and went out upon the piazza.

"My friends," he said, "we find that we cannot begin our investigation until afternoon, owing to the absence of—of a person who may prove an important witness. We mean to do our utmost to find and punish poor Matchin's murderer. Have patience all of you ; and whatever happens, remember that Pomfret has never yet been disgraced by a mob, and must not be now. Fair play and swift justice, both may be looked for here." There was a chorus of exclamations, questions, and comments, but the coroner stood unconcernedly beside the tall column which helped to uphold the broad porch awning, and looked over the crowd with a cool keen eye.

"They are all here," he said to himself, "all of Pomfret." And then, turning his gaze in a new direction, he saw, somewhat aloof from the crowd, Jonas Wiggins talking volubly in the midst of a group, composed of those of his own sort.

"That fellow means dirt," said he to himself, and he ran his eye over the group around him, taking mental note of each person. "Toughs, all of them," was his comment ; and then his eye fell upon a face he did not know. There were few faces in Pomfret unknown, at least by sight, to Pomfret's coroner, and this face was only interesting because of its strangeness. It was that of a man of more than medium height, with square shoulders and commonplace, expressionless features. His dress was ordinary, and a short pipe was stuck between his lips. He stood a little aloof from the group, but seemed to be listening to Wiggins.

"Wonder who *he* may be?" mused the coroner ; "one of the new hands at the mills, probably." And he began to thread his way through the crowd, avoiding would-be questioners, and giving brief, curt answers when he could not avoid.

The man who had attracted the notice of the coroner watched him as he went ; and, when he had vanished down the Avenue, drew nearer to Jonas Wiggins, and, standing there, dropped from time to time a careless question.

After a while he sauntered away from the group about Wiggins, and gradually drew nearer the bank building, passing the porticos slowly, and with indifferent, casual glances, but drawing closer to the iron fence which enclosed the sides and rear.

Close to the side door he stopped, and leaning across the low fence, looked at it as if it were an object of unusual interest ; then he passed on until he had reached the corner of the small enclosure; there he paused, and, with his back to the bank, and his face turned toward the crowd, coolly braced himself against the iron post and refilled his pipe. One of the men who kept guard outside made a movement forward as if to warn him away, but seeing his attitude, and occupation, he turned back. The crowd had almost ceased to strive for an entrance to the little fenced-in bit of ground, and the watchman walked back whence he came, and resumed the conversation with the guard next him, which he had broken off to warn away the intruder.

"I thought that fellow meant to try and get over," he said to his

comrade, "but he don't seem very anxious," and he went on with the talk in which he had grown interested.

"Yes, sir," he said, "I tell you it *does* look a bad case for Deering. I hate to think it! I ain't a thing against the fellow, and I wouldn't say a word to his hurt. But it *looks black!* I'm *bound* to admit *that!*"

For some moments the two conversed or argued, for they did not agree, and the man who was standing champion for Bruce Deering was becoming excited, when, chancing to look up and shift his position, he broke off sharply, saying—

"Look out! that fellow's in!"

The other turned swiftly.

"Look here, you!" he cried; "can't you see the signs on this here fence? and don't you see these boards laid around this lot to cover footmarks or any signs that's been left? You git out of this, an' don't make any more tracks than you need to neither!"

The stranger had been some moments inside the rails, and he had already crossed the lot from the side next the street almost to the inner fence which separated the place from a large piece of ground with well-cut sward and tastefully grouped shrubbery and trees.

"Excuse me," said the intruder quite meekly; "I didn't notice. I jest stepped in here to ask you two what was the rights of this talk about somebody being killed. You can't get anything rational out o' *that* crowd," jerking the pipe which he had taken from his mouth toward the throng outside.

But the man whose duty it had been to keep him out was not in a good humour.

"I guess you'll hear your share outside; and you don't want to be slow in going out neither," he said gruffly.

"Jest as you say, of course." The stranger replaced his pipe, drew a strong whiff to assure himself that it was still "alive," and began a careful retreat. The careless guardian had motioned him toward the point whence he came, but the man coolly turned in the opposite direction and went, with slow, conscious steps, along the inner wall of the bank, and so out at the front, springing over the small section of railing which ran from the front of the bank to the corner of the adjoining lot.

The little encounter had not lacked its observers, and some of them greeted his appearance upon the street with jocular or sarcastic comments, uttered loud enough to be heard by him. But they drew forth no sort of recognition. The man seemed in no way discomfited, and as it was nearing noon, and the guardian of the south-west corner came forth relieved from duty and out of temper, he saw the free-and-easy stranger still sauntering about among the various groups which, constantly changing, only increased in numbers as the day wore on.

. . . . . .

When twelve strokes sounded from the town clock upon the court-house tower, not far away, Mr. Baird consulted his own time-piece, from sheer force of habit, and said,

"The next train is due a few minutes after one. It is time we adjourn, and, by all means, be here, all of you, at a quarter before one." He arose and took up his hat.

The coroner had not returned after his brief harangue to the crowd outside, and the few men who were left in the office with the banker got up promptly.

At that moment a rap, not loud, but distinct, was heard at the office door.

It was Stairs in person, who, having taken a look about the building outside, had returned to the vestibule, to take the place of the man on guard over the two rooms whose doors were opposite each other. He had been sitting upon a high stool, brought away from one of the desks within, and he did not trouble himself to rise when a quiet, inoffensive-seeming stranger came in, and, after looking about him, asked with much respectfulness,—

"Which room is Mr.—Mr. Baird in?"

Stairs jerked his thumb toward the door at his right, and then nullified this piece of condescension by saying, "You can't *see* him though."

For answer, the man tapped upon the door indicated by the thumb.

"Hold on!" Stairs slipped off the stool and put a detaining hand on the intruder's arm. "What do you want? You can't go in there, I tell you!"

The man drew from a loose side pocket an envelope bearing the stamp of the telegraph office. "Got a message for him," he said quite deferentially.

"Well, I'll 'tend to that. Give it to me."

"Against orders," said the man, and was about to apply his knuckles a second time, when the door opened and Mr. Baird stood before them.

"What is it?" he asked.

The man put the envelope in his hand in silence. It was unsealed, and after an instant's glance at the contents, merely a card upon which a name and a few words were written, he threw the door wide open. "Come in," he said briskly, "come in at once!" Then sharply, to the astonished watchman, "It's all right, Stairs. Don't let anyone come near the door now, mind; and don't leave it yourself."

When the door had closed upon the astonished Stairs, Mr. Baird turned toward his friends. "Gentlemen, this could not be better," he said. "It is what I wished, but feared would be impossible—that we that are here,—*and no others*,—should first discuss this matter with a practical detective. This card," holding out the card he had just drawn from the telegraph envelope, "is from the Chief of R——'s Detective Bureau, and it introduces and commends to us, as '*the man we want*,' Mr. Ferriss Murtagh." He made a slight gesture toward the stranger, who bowed his acknowledgments and stood silently waiting.

"Resume your places, gentlemen," said the banker briskly, "and you, Mr. Murtagh, sit here; we have looked for you anxiously. How did you contrive to appear at this particular moment?"

"I arrived in Pomfret," said Mr. Murtagh easily, "by the ten o'clock mail."

The man who sat among them, looking from one to another with clear and quiet glance, was the same who had listened to the harangue of Jonas Wiggins, had bearded the sentries of the "back yards," and

lounged, with wooden face and slouching manner, among the Pomfret idlers and groups. The same, yet not the same. The garments were the same, but the form they clad no longer lounged or slouched, or bore itself with awkwardness. The face was no longer wooden; the dull eye, with its lifeless stare, was no longer either dull or lifeless. This was a man of fine figure and goodly height, with erect square shoulders, small, well-shaped hands, that looked strong, and never belied their look by a useless or purposeless movement; with a strong face capable of many expressions, and, like the eyes, able to beam with mirthful good-humour, to awe by its sternness, or to drop in a moment into expressionless insipidity according to his mood or will. The fine mouth and firm under jaw were concealed by bushy whiskers of the same lifeless, yellowy-brown colour as the hair that clung about his neck and ears; but the eyebrows, which his hat had entirely shaded, now showed themselves quite dark.

"You see," Mr. Murtagh went on easily, "I like, when I can do so, to look over my ground quite by myself, unbiased by any report, any story from witness or participator, friend or foe. I have often found it worth a bushel of explanations; and this case of yours afforded an especially good chance. Would you like me to tell you what *I* know of this affair?"

He turned his questioning eyes toward Mr. Baird; the banker nodded, with a look of surprise upon his face.

"I have been," began the detective, "something less than two hours here, 'upon the scene,' as they say in the stories. It appears that a man, Joseph Matchin by name, a bachelor, and more or less eccentric, who has been caretaker of this bank for a good many years, was killed last night, probably near midnight. He was killed by persons, or a person, unknown. Am I right thus far?"

Mr. Baird nodded.

"The crime was discovered by a party of gentlemen returning from a late supper. There has been a great search, as thorough a search as could be made in the nature of things, but the murderer has escaped. Is that correct?"

"Almost," said the clergyman.

"I might amuse you with dozens of droll ideas, theories, suspicions, conjectures, but not now. The majority of the mob are making all manner of wild guesses at the possible murderers, and are all at sea. But there is a faction," here he withdrew his gaze from the face of the banker, and let it pass easily from face to face as he went on, "one faction which has fixed upon the guilty man, and I believe they mean mischief, at least the ringleader does. His name is *Wiggins*."

"Yes," said Mr. Baird, quickly, "we have heard of Wiggins and his talk."

"I presumed as much. Now, sir, I am ready to hear your story. If I had not already heard so much, I would ask you to let me go over the ground first, the scene of the murder I mean; as it is, let me hear what you can tell me—unless—" smiling slightly, "you are doubtful about trusting me with your case."

Mr. Baird took from the table at his elbow the card he had deposited there, and for answer read these words:

"*I send you Ferriss Murtagh. I could not send a better man. He can be trusted under all circumstances.*"

"There, Mr. Murtagh," he said, as he put the card down, "*that*, coming from the head of your Bureau, should be answer enough."

"Very well. Now, do you assure me that I can trust each one of you here present?"

"Yes," said the banker with emphasis.

"One moment." It was Bruce Deering who spoke. "Before we go further, let me say, Mr. Murtagh, that *I* am the man who has been picked out for the assassin."

"Oh, I am quite aware of that, Mr. Deering," replied the cool detective. "Gentlemen, permit me to make myself more comfortable," and he put up his hand and with two or three dexterous movements relieved himself of the yellow-brown wig and the bushy whiskers, and sat before them clean-shaven, and with short, black locks thickly streaked with grey.

Thus bared to their view it was a strong, firm face, and the hopes of each, and their confidence as well, grew apace as they gazed.

"Now," he said, nodding to Mr. Baird, "will you let me begin as I will?"

"Assuredly."

"Then—first, who was the very first one to discover this murder?"

Bruce Deering answered at once, "I believe it to have been myself."

"Is there a possibility that there may have been another?"

"I do not think so. I think—I am *sure* that I grappled with the escaping assassin. Shall I give you the particulars?"

"Yes—and carefully."

He did give them carefully; so carefully that the astute detective scarcely needed to interrupt the narrative from first to last. It was only when they had reached the point where the three young men, essaying to lift the dying man, had heard those strange last words, that he broke in upon the narrator.

"One question, Mr. Deering, if you are willing to answer it; of course it is not compulsory—*here*. When you heard these words, with your name so strangely intermingled, what were your first thoughts?"

Deering was silent a moment, then he said,

"My first *thoughts*, I hardly can say. My first *feeling* was certainly one of horror at the idea, the accusation those words seemed to convey. The thing stunned me."

"And well it might. Thank you, Mr. Deering, and one more question. Was there anyone else? Do you think it possible that the man might have meant some person other than you, of the same name?"

"Frankly, no. I think, when he spoke my name, he meant *me*."

"Oh!" The detective now turned to Mr. Morse, and this time, he interrupted often, and asked many questions. When each in turn had told all he knew, and had been very keenly and closely questioned, the detective arose. "It is almost one o'clock," he said, "and I would be glad to look at the room where the thing occurred now, at once!" He went to the door, and then turned back. "Remain

here, all of you, please. I think I need not detain you long. Now, show me the way, Mr. Baird."

When the detective and the banker were outside, and about to enter the room where Joseph Matchin lay upon the long table, the former paused.

"One question," he said briskly. "Is your coroner shrewd, intelligent, the right sort?"

"Doctor Liscom? He is—exceptionally so."

"A man who will not obstruct; one who has tact?"

"I think so. Besides, he is one of my oldest friends."

"Good!" said the detective with fervent emphasis. "That's all."

Five minutes later, Mr. Baird re-entered the room where the four waiting men sat, alone.

"Mr. Deering," he announced, "you are wanted out there by Mr. Murtagh."

. . . . . .

When the two men came back, twenty minutes later, they found Mr. Liscom with the others, and the detective was promptly presented. The two men shook hands, and before the two hands fell apart, the detective began.

"Mr. Coroner, this afternoon's inquiry can be nothing more than preliminary, and I am going to ask you to conduct it in such a manner as to leave *me* out of it entirely. It would spoil my usefulness were I to appear now, and it can do no good. If I might advise, I should say, *do not look too far for witnesses*, let them present themselves." The eyes of the two men met, and challenged each other for a moment. "It is useful sometimes," went on Murtagh after a full pause, "to know whether our witnesses are reluctant, willing, or actually anxious to be called upon." Another pause. "Do we understand each other?"

"Quite," said Doctor Liscom.

"Then," finished Murtagh, "let the inquiry begin as soon as you please."

Mr. Baird, who for some moments had been watching the window, suddenly approached the door, and opened it to admit a man bearing a monster hamper.

"I had, Mr. Murtagh, just such a possibility as this in mind," he declared, "when I ordered luncheon here for half-a-dozen. It would never have done to send down luncheon for *one*."

The coroner put on his hat.

"Dispatch it at once," he commanded, "while I go to hunt up my jury. The inquest will open as soon as this is accomplished."

CHAPTER V.

THE INQUEST.

THE murdered man had no near friends, and no relatives, whose whereabouts were known to anyone in Pomfret. Parents, brothers, and sisters, all were dead; and the only living relative of whom he

had any knowledge was his pretty niece, Rose, who had left him, almost three years before, secretly, and by night; gone as so many young girls, who are pretty and ignorant, vain and ambitious, have gone, since the beginning of civilisation and sin.

The girl had been the legacy of a dying sister, an only sister; and, although Joe Matchin had been long known as a confirmed bachelor, who claimed to be a woman hater, and openly detested small children, he never thought of refusing the charge. He had placed her in the care of an honest woman, the wife of an honest artisan, who was one of his cronies, and there she had remained, while Matchin lived on as before, keeping his own house, cooking his own dinners, and plodding to and fro between his little cot and his snug corner in the bank building, summer and winter, through rain and shine, until Rose grew to young girlhood, and was thrown back upon his reluctant hands by the death of her protectress.

At first he demurred, when the young girl, laughingly, proposed to become his housekeeper; but the crust above a really warm heart was not deep, and time and a little development transformed grumpy Joe Matchin into a proud and self-satisfied householder; for "Niece Rose" was deft and dainty in her ways, and had been trained in the arts of housekeeping.

Then passed, beyond a doubt, three of the happiest years of the old bachelor's life. His world was bounded by all that lay outside his house, where "Niece Rose" reigned supreme, and his bank, where, in his own department, he reigned supreme also. Honest, faithful, one of the few contented ones of the earth, because he asked of it so little.

Then came an evening when "Niece Rose" left him, she said, "to spend the night with a girl friend," and a morning when she did not return. At first his faith in the girl could not be shaken, even when no plausible reason could be found for her absence. And then a letter found its way to him which shattered that faith. After that he refused to speak of her or hear her spoken of. He went back to his old life, living again as he had lived before her coming, only more secluded, less social, and seen less than ever away from the bank and the little cottage.

Joe Matchin was a model of faithfulness, and when on duty, which was by day and night, and week upon week, except upon Sundays and legal holidays, he was the most temperate of men. Sundays, too, he respected, after his own odd fashion; going to church, and promptly to sleep behind the great pillar which shut in and secluded his usual seat at the end of the back pew; fishing, perhaps, on fair afternoons, but temperate all through the day, and prompt at his post at six o'clock in the evening, making his nightly round, and snug in his bunk at seven o'clock, an hour earlier than his week-day time for retiring.

But when a legal holiday came, Joe Matchin emerged from his burr, and, arrayed in his best, drank with befitting dignity exactly two morning glasses of beer in honour of the day, and to demonstrate his freedom as an American citizen, after which he became the most affable of men and the most loquacious possible, but dignified still. At noon he always dined abroad. On these occasions he took two more glasses, and then, as the day waned, one might find him still

talkative, but less agreeable ; prone, indeed, to disagree, and easily led on to talk upon the subject on which he was silent at all other times—of "Niece Rose ;" and then, amid curses and muttered threats, he would utter a name, two names, and declare bitterly that, between these two, lay the guilt of robbing his home and making of his sister's child an outcast.

These names were those of no commonplace personages, otherwise poor Matchin's holiday accusations might have been more widely spread about Pomfret. As it was, his words were repeated with bated breath, re-told with caution, and no retailer of the charge, roundly made, and devoid of detail, was willing to admit himself such.

And so, while there were many in Pomfret who knew, vaguely, that Joe Matchin had named two men and placed an accusation between them, there were also many who knew nothing of all this.

If Joe Matchin had few warm and intimate friends, he was not known to have *one* enemy ; everyone knew him, everyone believed in and admired him for his honesty, and smiled indulgently at his oddities. And so the question which was upon every tongue on this day of the inquest was, "*Who* could have killed Joe Matchin? And for what?" And to this question there was no reply forthcoming.

. . . . . .

When the hour for the inquest arrived, and the coroner and his friends were in their places with half-a-dozen policemen to keep the crowd back from the long table and act as barriers about it, the coroner directed Stairs to throw open the outer doors and admit as many as could decently crowd into the larger room and group themselves about the doors of the adjoining offices, which were thrown open, as well as all of the doors and windows, at each of which, however, a muscular guard was placed.

Mr. Baird, the clergyman, and the three young men who were the principal witnesses, took refuge inside the steel-barred enclosure where the business of the bank was transacted, and the coroner's small table was drawn close to the largest of the "brass-latticed windows," which was open, and at which, for the most of the time, Mr. Baird stood, his face stern and inscrutable.

As for Detective Ferriss Murtagh, he had resumed his unornamental wig and whiskers, and had found for himself a snug place in the crowd, but yet not far from the coroner, and almost facing him.

To those who looked for disclosures and hungered for sensation, the inquest was certainly a disappointment at first. There was some display of impatience from the crowd when the inquest failed to begin promptly, and, to quiet the restless ones and gain time, the clergyman came out from behind the office partition, and, standing near the coroner, made a little speech, reminding them that no one desired delay ; that there were men there present who had not slept for twenty-four hours, who were weary and anxious to be about their own affairs and to rest. But all were more anxious to see justice done and a wrong righted; and so they were waiting patiently now for the coming of the sheriff. The messenger sent for him hours before had not found him at home. He had spent the night at Rosedale; but Mr. Liscom had just received a telegram asking him to delay the inquest

a little. He, the sheriff, hoped to be present before three o'clock. At half-past two, therefore, Coroner Liscom would begin.

While this little speech was in progress, John Redding, who was seated near a window looking toward the Avenue, whispered to Morse, who sat next him :

"I don't like the looks of things. That scoundrel Wiggins is outside there vibrating between the two streets. Rest assured he has not remained outside for no purpose."

"What do you suspect is his game?" queried Morse.

"It's clear enough. He's waiting to waylay the sheriff. *I* don't like it. You know they call Carton a hard man, and quite merciless toward a suspected person."

"And you think Wiggins wants to drop him a 'word in season'?"

"It looks like it." He turned back to the window, and the uneasy alertness of the man Wiggins, increasing as the moments passed, more than confirmed his first suspicion. Suddenly a thought caused him to start and take a little memorandum book from his pocket; in a moment he had scribbled a few words upon a leaf and torn the fragment from the book, folding it small and then letting it fall to the floor at his feet. A moment later he whispered again to his friend Morse, "Pick up the note I have dropped between us and slip it, as soon as you can, into Mr. Baird's hand."

A moment later Mr. Baird was reading, under cover of a newspaper, these words, hastily scrawled, but legible :

"Wiggins is up to mischief. If the inquest could begin, and the evidence of Deering, Morse, and myself be *got over*, it will be better for the plans of your detective, as I understand them. Wiggins means to post the sheriff."

For a length of time, to be measured by seconds, the banker seemed to ponder, while he tore to tatters the tiny note. Then he went to the door of the enclosure and beckoned the coroner to come closer. He whispered a few words, the coroner nodded and went back to his place, and for two or three moments there was partial quiet in the room, while the people whispered or talked with those nearest them in low tones. Then Doctor Liscom looked at his watch and arose, turning toward Stairs who was posted at the outer door.

"Stairs," he asked, "do you see any sign of Sheriff Carton?"

Stairs spoke to someone outside, and, after a moment of waiting, turned back and answered,

"He is not here yet. And he is not in sight upon either road."

"It is half-past two," said the coroner, resuming his seat. "We can wait no longer."

Bruce Deering was the first witness called. He came forward with quiet dignity and told the story of the previous night. The coroner listened like one who hears and accepts, perforce, unimpeachable testimony; and when the point was reached where the three young men tried to lift the fallen man, and heard his last strange words, he did a very unusual and a very daring thing.

"You say, Mr. Deering, that the man, whom you at first thought to be dead, moved slightly and moaned. Do you think that he was conscious, that is to say rational? Did he recognise you—any of you?"

"He could hardly have done that, sir, at least not by sight, for his eyes were covered with blood, and the bruises about them must have blinded him."

"Ah! and he tried to speak, I think you have said. Was it rationally—coherently?"

"Rationally—of that I cannot say, sir. I could only utter my judgment. Coherent—entirely so—I do not think it was. His efforts to speak were made between gasps. I think he was choking."

"Ah! internal hemorrhage—of course." He seemed to ponder a moment, looked into a big book which lay near his hand, made a brave show of writing some minutes, and then said, still with that air of being taken with some strange new thought which must be made fast but must not be uttered, he said, abstractedly, and without looking up from his minutes,

"That will—do. Call Mr.—Mr.—ah—Mr. John Redding."

Redding came out from the cage with the unconcern of an unimportant witness, who has nothing whatever at stake, and repeated Deering's story, all but the first of it, and was questioned by the coroner, as if that worthy man were bent upon finding any least atom of difference therein.

When again they had reached the point where the three had essayed to lift the dying man, Liscom asked—

"You say he spoke but incoherently. Now, could you repeat those words?"

"Not as he uttered them," replied Redding promptly. "They were so broken. It seemed to me that he was confused and perhaps wandering—or that he was trying to tell somebody something—and broke off to curse his destroyer. It was as if he began one thing, and, after repeated choking and gasping, finished by trying to utter something else."

"Then you do not think he was rational?"

"How *could* I?" The witness threw back his head, and the two men eyed each other squarely. "The words, the few that I caught, were—*wild!*"

"That will do."

In the momentary silence which followed, while Redding was making his slow progress back to his place inside the cage, the sound of wheels was distinctly heard outside, even while the coroner was saying,

"The next witness in order is Mr.—Morse." And then, through the sounds of the stir occasioned by the arriving wheels, faint, but distinct and sibilant to the ears for which it was intended, came the whisper,

"*Skip him.*"

With no sign that he heard the rapidly rolling wheels, and without lifting his eyes from his helpful note-book, the coroner said slowly,

"Mr. Morse, do not come forward; just rise and answer one question. Can you take the stand to add anything to the story we have already heard twice?"

"I can only repeat," replied Morse; "all has been told better than I can tell it."

"Then I shall not trouble you, at least, not now."

There was a stir about the door, and then Stairs opened it wide and admitted the sheriff. Behind him came Jonas Wiggins.

The coroner arose to greet his brother official, and seemed to be explaining, briefly, what had been done since the inquest began; and Redding seized the opportunity to say to Mr. Baird, in a cautious whisper,

"It is as I thought; Wiggins was the first man to buttonhole Carton, before he was out of his buggy. I think he has made an impression."

Sheriff Carton conferred for some moments with the coroner. He seemed to be urging some point with much earnestness, and when he finally seated himself near Liscom, his brow wore a frown.

"As it seems to follow naturally the statements made by Messrs. Deering and Redding," resumed Doctor Liscom, "I will now myself take the witness stand and give my opinion, my *decision*, as regards the cause of this death we are seeking to investigate."

The coroner of Pomfret could be didactic upon occasion; and he chose to be didactic now. His learned and minute discourse held the majority of his audience, and, when he resumed his place at the small table, only an interested few realised that he had taken up full half-an-hour of the fast-waning afternoon.

Briefly related, this was his testimony:—

Being called to this place not long after midnight, etc., etc., he had found deceased lying just inside the door giving entrance to the bank, precisely as had been stated by previous witnesses. He was dead—had been dead not *less* than one hour, not *more* than one hour and one half. And he had been killed by blows upon the head from some blunt and heavy weapon, probably of hard wood, or iron. These blows were at least eight in number, all upon and about the head and face. Some of them had bled outwardly and profusely, but those which had caused almost immediate death had bled inwardly, and thus the death, which was certain in any case, had been hastened by strangulation.

"Do you mean," broke in the sheriff sharply, "that the villains had finished their work with their *hands?*"

"I was about to say," calmly concluded the coroner, "that strangulation, caused by the internal hemorrhage, had hastened the end by—possibly—half-an-hour."

Mr. Baird followed the coroner, and was permitted to tell his story in his own way, until, at the last, the sheriff, after a moment's conference with Doctor Liscom, said:

"Mr. Baird, I am permitted to ask a question; it can be briefly answered." He leaned forward, and fixed a keen and meaning look upon the witness: "Do you suspect anyone? Have you seen or heard here to-day, *or at any moment* since the discovery of the murder, anything—*anything whatever*—to cause you *to suspect anyone?*"

Mr. Baird returned the sheriff's gaze with a serenely open glance.

"No one," he said concisely. "No one, *and nothing*."

There was a small stir and some unintelligible muttering in the corner where Jonas Wiggins had found a place, and the sheriff bit his thin underlip, and dropped his eyes.

Mr. Baird resumed his seat, and then followed half-a-dozen of the men who had been beating the woods, and fields, and highways and by-ways about the town. It was the same story from all. No discoveries, no clues—nothing to awaken a suspicion anywhere.

Tom Wells was the seventh of these witnesses. He had an alert look, and he answered the questions of the coroner with a knowing promptness. The answers were the same at first as those of the six scouts who had preceded him, but they were given with a difference, which prompted the coroner to ask at the last :

"You say, Wells, that you found no traces of a possible murderer, and that you encountered only *two* persons upon your way, and saw lights in but two houses. Where were these lights?"

"The first," began Wells, "was at Wardell Place. There was light at the big, south-east window, and one on the floor above." There was a quick turning of heads among the men who had aided in the search, and an exchange of whispers. "Then," Wells went on, "there was a bright light at Sam Rand's, jest acrost the creek."

"A bright light, you say ; did you learn the cause?"

"The doctor's gig was at the gate. The baby was sick."

There was a giggle from Jonas Wiggins' party in the far corner.

"And the two persons whom you saw—was the doctor one of them?"

"Yes, sir, it was Doctor Bates."

"Yes. And the other person, who was that?"

Wells moved forward a step.

"The other was a lady," he said, in a hesitating manner.

"A lady ! Name her."

"It was Miss Ora Wardell."

The coroner bit his lip. Ora Wardell was the orphan daughter of one of Pomfret's wealthiest citizens, but lately deceased ; the only daughter, and the mistress of Wardell Place, which stood upon the Avenue, directly east of St. Mark's Church, and upon the same side of the street. The front of the stately residence faced the east upon Laurel Place, the side entrance and a spacious lawn looking upon the Avenue, and the rear wall of the garden separating the Wardell grounds from those surrounding and enclosing the church.

"It seems hardly needful to bring Miss Wardell's name into this affair, Wells," the coroner admonished. "But since it is done, you may state, briefly, *how* you chanced to encounter Miss Wardell at such an hour,—and *where?*"

"There were three of us that set out from here together, sir, as you may remember. And when we had got ourselves a lantern apiece we divided up, and I happened to take the north side of the Avenue, with Holt on the other side. When we came to the fence about Wardell Place, I noticed the lights inside and sort of halted, and without thinking, lifted up my lantern so that it shone right through that little arch that stands a little ways from the palings, and it shone full upon Miss Wardell."

"Well ! go on," commanded the coroner crisply. "Miss Wardell had heard the noise, I suppose, through her open library window, and had come out to see what had happened, eh?"

"Yes, sir. That's jest what she *said.* She had one of the men servants with her, and she told him to wait fur her there, and then she come down to the palings quick as soon as she knew who it was standin' there; she said she had been settin' up late readin', and had heard noises down here, and finally had ventured out to see what was up."

"Yes, yes; I see. Quite natural; but if that is all, Wells, no more need be said. I am sorry that Miss Wardell has been shocked by this sad affair, as she must have been. Have you anything more that bears upon our case?"

"Yes, sir; though, if Miss Wardell hadn't a come down to speak to me, I shouldn't a had."

"What do you mean, Wells?"

"I mean that Miss Wardell give me the *only clue* I've caught on to yet."

Liscom started; and all through the room there was a general stir of interest.

"What was that clue?" demanded the coroner.

"When I told her what had happened, she sort of caught her breath, and she said, 'Then I heard him!—I must have heard him!' and she went on to tell that a little while before, while she sat readin' not far from the open window, she heard someone come runnin' *down the road*, and *not* on the walk, as would seem natural; she said she kind of laid down her book and sat listenin', thinkin' how queer it was that the person did not go on the walk; and just then she heard the sound of a horse's feet goin' along on Laurel Place. Then, just when she began to read again, all at once the bell began to ring; and then she began to wonder where the fire could be. And after a bit she called one of her servin' men and came outside, as anyone naturally would."

Wells turned away as if there was no more to be said; and the coroner asked sharply:

"Is that all, Wells?"

"Yes, sir; that's all."

Sheriff Carton leaned forward.

"I think Miss Wardell should be called," he said.

Wells, who was just about to resume his seat, drew himself erect again.

"It won't be worth your while," he said, with a grin. "Miss Wardell went down the Avenue in her carriage, not half-an-hour ago, drivin' to'rds Lisle."

As he once more lowered himself into his chair, his eye encountered that of the coroner, and a glance of intelligence passed between them.

There were other witnesses called, but the interest in the inquest upon the body of Joe Matchin flagged perceptibly. No one could tell just what he had really looked for, but, whatever it might have been, the general verdict was that, as an investigation, it was a flat and emphatic failure

There had been no revelations, no accusations, no sensation worthy of the occasion. And the verdict of the jury had been "Murdered, killed by the hand of some person or persons unknown."

When the verdict was announced, and the inquiry adjourned, the

coroner ordered an immediate clearing of the bank and the building; and Stairs, with his stalwart helpers, were prompt in carrying out this order. The crowd was hurried out, willing or not, and only the few most interested were left in possession.

While they were yet numerous in the room, each outgoing sensation-lover crowding his neighbour in a vain endeavour to get close to the body lying stiff beneath the concealing pall, the man with the dingy whiskers had made his way close to the railing which separated Mr. Baird from the crowd on the outer side, and had contrived to whisper

"Clear this place as quickly as possible, *I want to see you here alone.*"

The banker nodded, and turned at once toward Bruce Deering, who had laid a hand upon his arm.

"What is it, Deering?"

"You have telegraphed to my uncle, have you not?"

"No. In his last letter he told me not to communicate with him until he wired me. They were going up the river, he said."

"Oh! Then let me ask you—you know my uncle's condition?"

"Yes."

"Let me ask you, then, not to speak of me, whatever happens, when you do wire or write him. Whatever comes let this news wait, if it is possible, until he is here among us. I ask it for his sake, not for my own."

"You are most considerate, Deering. I understand, and it shall be as you wish—*if possible.*"

"Thank you. I can ask no more."

In the meantime the sheriff had caught at Coroner Liscom's arm.

"I must have a talk with you," he said—"with you and with Baird." His brow wore a frown, and his voice was surly. "I don't like the way things have gone. Clear this place. Let's have it out here."

But when this wish, uttered like a command, was made known to Mr. Baird, that gentleman shook his head. "Take him to your office, Liscom," he said, "and give him plenty of rope. Tell him I'll join you soon, and that this place must be cleared, for a time, to all but the undertakers."

. . . . . .

"Liscom," broke out the stalwart sheriff, when the two men were at last seated in Doctor Liscom's cosy private office, a good quarter of a mile from the scene of the bank tragedy—"Liscom, I can't, for the life of me, see why you made that inquiry so tame, so flat, so useless, as a beginning, a means toward an end! unless you *want* to blind justice—!"

The coroner turned and looked the sheriff square in the eye.

Look here, Carton, you and I will play with cards upon the table. We, Mr. Baird, myself, and others, *mean* to have justice!—to see justice done! and we don't mean to make any deplorable mistakes through over-haste in taking up and making much of purely circumstantial evidence; more than all, we do not mean to be urged on to unwise measures because of the malevolent harping of a man whose testimony *upon oath* would be, to say the least, *doubted.*"

"But—why man! you have no right to withhold evidence!"

"Nor did we—we simply did not press certain witnesses so far as we might. That is all."

"Well," declared Carton, by no means appeased, "*I* mean to see through this matter—*with* your help or *without* it!"

"Very good. Only, Carton, remember this: an officer of the law can't hold himself too severely aloof from any contact with the *mob* element. For the rest, make yourself easy, or as easy as you can, until you have seen Baird."

CHAPTER VI.

ORA.

MISS WARDELL'S victoria, which, according to Tom Wells, had taken its way past the bank, during the progress of the inquest, and been driven down the Avenue in the direction of Lisle, did not continue in that direction; but, at the point where the Avenue merged itself into the Lisle road, to the right, and into another, commonly called the "ridge road," to the left, it was ordered to turn northward, and so took its way, softly rolling along the "ridge," which skirted the town at a considerable elevation, and led back into it, connecting at the northern extremity of the town with the very foot of Main Street, crossing it, and running on, in a north-easterly direction, out into the country once more.

When the victoria had reached Main Street, Miss Wardell said to her driver:

"You may turn here, James, and drive in at the upper gate of Beechwood; drive to the side door."

Beechwood was the stately home of Judge Deering, the uncle of Bruce Deering, and president of the Pomfret Bank. And even the fine home of Ora Wardell could not rival it for beauty, size, and perfection of appointment. Beechwood was the show place of Pomfret, and its master was accounted by far the wealthiest man in a wealthy county.

As Miss Wardell was driven through the upper or side gate and down the curving drive toward the side entrance, she noted that the great front windows were all closed and tightly shuttered; that the massive main entrance was shut and padlocked; and that an air of loneliness and desertion brooded over the place.

"It looks abandoned altogether," she thought as she drew up at the side entrance; and then she gave the order:

"Get down, James, and see if you can raise one of the servants; I wish to see the housekeeper."

But it was not the housekeeper who, after some moments, appeared in answer to repeated pulls at the loud ringing bell. Mrs. Merton, for many years the housekeeper at Beechwood, was a plump and comfortable looking matron of full sixty years, fresh faced, smiling, and never seen by mortal, be it by day or night, without her tidy apron, big and

white if it were morning; smaller and of shining black silk if it were later than high noon; and at all times her crinkling white hair was crowned with a black lace cap, more or less ornate, as the occasion demanded.

The person who peered out through the scarcely half-opened door, and then came forth and dropped a quaint curtsy upon the stone step at the top of the flight of five leading up from the neat gravel path, was a small and dark woman, with a decidedly foreign face and dark, restless eyes, that scanned the visitor with quick, keen glances, which lost nothing in their rapid survey.

"Miss Wardell?" said this person with a tone of inquiry, and in a foreign accent.

"Good-morning, Madam Sarita. I am glad that you have not forgotten me," said Miss Wardell, affably. "Can I see Mrs. Merton for a moment?"

Madam Sarita came to the edge of the broad upper step before she answered.

"Mrs. Merton is not here, miss. She is visiting with her niece in Buffalo."

"Really! And will she be long away?"

"She went day before yesterday, and was to have two weeks' leave at the least."

"Indeed! Yes, I see. And you, of course, are left in charge?" The young lady glanced about her. "Beechwood looks deserted; are you not lonely? Of course, though, you are not *alone?*"

"I might almost as well be. I have no one in the house except Jane, the laundress, who is deaf as the dead. Mrs. Deering thought fit to give the servants a holiday while they were all away, and everyone was glad enough to go. Of course the coachman is here, and the head gardener; but they stay, except for their meals, at the stable. *I* don't mind the quiet, miss. I stayed from choice, else the house—which is quite burglar proof, if house ever was—would have been closed for at least a month."

"Really?" Miss Wardell was silent a moment, then—

"And Miss Rodney? Did she go with her guardian and his wife after all?"

The woman's lips set themselves in a firm line. "Miss Rodney is in Baltimore," she said stiffly.

"With the Rextrews—of course! And when will she return?—soon, I hope."

"There's no telling. Mr. Deering does not think of coming back for some weeks yet; they've been away six already. And Miss Rodney won't be long behind them, I don't doubt."

"Ah! I'm *so* glad to hear it! We miss them all, I assure you. I wonder if I might leave a message with you—in case Mrs. Merton returns sooner than you expect?" She leaned toward the woman, who came slowly down the steps and stood beside the carriage.

"She won't come any sooner," she said then.

"Oh! Then I must wait." She was still leaning out, one little gloved hand resting upon the wheel-guard, and a dainty handkerchief fluttering from her fingers. "Then I won't detain you, Madam

Sarita. Oh, but I must ask—about Mr. Deering! Do you hear anything in regard to his health?"

"Mr. Bruce has told me that he has seen the two great doctors; they think he may do very well if he avoids all mental effort and over-excitement. It's a quiet life he must lead the rest of his days, they say."

"Oh! I'm *so* sorry! I fear that will be a little hard for poor Mrs. Deering."

"Mrs. Deering does not seem to mind being quiet; for a young woman she's wonderfully still in her ways. She'll bear him company fast enough."

Miss Wardell smiled down at her. "I see that you understand your household," she said, still smiling. "But I must not detain you longer. My errand was from my housekeeper to Mrs. Merton, but it will have to wait; you know they often exchange those wonderful recipes of theirs, and Mrs. Gray fancied that Mrs. Merton had been left in charge here. I had no idea what a general flitting had taken place. And you will still be alone for two weeks to come? Well," with another gleaming smile and a little wave of the hand holding the dainty handkerchief, "good-day, Madam Sarita. Now, James—home."

As the carriage swung round, and while the coachman's back was still toward her, Sarita took a step forward, and so covered, with her small, neat boot, something which lay directly under the place where the gloved hand had rested over the wheel.

When the carriage had turned and was rolling down Main Street townward, she cast a quick glance all about her, and then, stooping, picked up the small object, sitting down upon the lowest step with her hand closed tightly over it.

"Queer!" she muttered. "How came she to be so careless, I wonder?" She opened her hand, laid a small square of paper many times folded upon her lap, looked at it for a moment, and then deliberately began to unfold it. The inner side was almost covered with writing, and when she had given it one glance, she clutched at it with both hands and gasped, as once more, and with an affrighted air, she looked about her. "Holy saints!" she muttered, as she bent her head above the scrawled lines. "How came *this*—horror? Oh! *what shall I do!*"

Meanwhile, as the victoria drove away from Beechwood and back toward the heart of Pomfret, the smile died upon the lips of Ora Wardell, and she leaned wearily back in her elegant carriage, seemingly lost in thought.

It was barely a mile from the Pomfret Bank to Beechwood, and they were half-way down the straight and well-graded road when the handsome brunette face was lifted, and the slender graceful figure, reclining against the springy cushions, drew itself erect, as she glanced about her with some new purpose revealing itself in the determined curves of her fine red mouth.

"James," she said, "turn at the next cross street; drive over to the Avenue, and drive slower." As the victoria swung round the next corner she shifted her position and leaned back once more in an attitude of careless ease, with her well-gloved hands crossed lightly upon her lap. Beechwood stood in solitary grandeur at the end of

Main Street, and for a quarter of a mile, looking townward, there was no other residence, nothing, indeed, upon the Beechwood side but the enclosed stretch of woodland, well trimmed and laid out with rustic paths, which was called Beechwood Park.

But the carriage was now passing through populated Pomfret, and Miss Wardell bowed easily now and then as she passed a face that she knew. It was a friendly nod always, and the face beneath the picturesque carriage hat was as serene as possible. But the half closed eyes were very alert, nothing escaped them, and presently, as the victoria rolled easily down Oak Avenue, she said :—

"Drive up to Doctor Liscom's gate, James. That is the doctor upon the terrace, is it not?"

Doctor Liscom and the sheriff had adjourned to the open air, and were regaling themselves with a couple of fragrant cigars, when Miss Wardell's victoria came into view. They were still discussing the inquest, and had lately had her name upon their lips. They were discussing the propriety of hailing her carriage, when it drew out of the highway, and approached the gate.

Doctor Liscom went briskly to meet it, and, after a moment, the sheriff followed, as rapidly as official dignity would permit.

Miss Wardell was bending from her carriage, her great dark eyes fixed upon the coroner's face with a look of serious concern.

"I am very glad to tell you *anything* that I *can*," she was saying as the sheriff joined them. "Yes, it was as Wells has told you. I had a visitor earlier in the evening, and when I was at last alone I took up a book and began reading. You know poor papa kept late hours, Doctor Liscom, and I have fallen into his habit through keeping him company so much. When I heard the passing feet, I only thought of it as being some late merrymaker, and I knew too of the supper at Brian Lodge. And then—I heard the horse. I had but just put aside my book, and I suppose I was stupid from drowsiness, without really being aware of it; certainly I did not connect the horse and the hurrying footsteps at first. Then I heard the bell, and went outside."

She had barely glanced at the sheriff, who was now standing near the doctor, and only a step in the rear, and had addressed herself to the latter without pausing, when the sheriff approached. But now she bent her fine eyes upon him, and said, with a little hesitating smile and gesture, "I think—this must be Mr.—Carton—our sheriff—is it not?" And then, as he bowed and drew a step nearer, she went on, speaking rapidly.

"I ventured to stop and ask about the inquest. Of course I have heard very little, except what I could not avoid hearing from the servants; not a reliable source, you know. Poor Matchin! such a faithful person! I knew him quite well;" turning her eyes upon the sheriff. "You know he was in charge of St. Mark's, and kept the keys, and I, for some time, have been the organist there; the organ is an especially fine one, and he was always *so* kind about opening the church for me whenever the whim seized me to go over and play for an hour. Has anything been discovered? Have they found any clue to the—the robbers?"

"Nothing definite," replied the coroner quickly. "There has hardly been time as yet. Mr. Carton here has but just entered into the case, and he will make good use of his time."

"Pardon me," Carton broke in, with his gaze upon the lady, "you speak of robbers. Is the idea afloat that there has been a robbery as well as murder?"

"Has there *not?*" her face expressive of keenest astonishment. "Why, really, I don't know *how* I got the idea! Was it not a bank robbery, then? Why else should that poor man have been struck down while guarding the bank?"

"As yet we cannot even guess at the motive," Liscom breaks quickly in. "We have no evidence of robbery—as yet."

"Why, Mr. Liscom, I feel like a traducer! How one's ideas can run away with one! Now, look at it: I hardly thought of the footsteps or the galloping horse, until I was told that someone had entered the bank and attacked the watchman, and then, straightway, I must recall those things, and fancy that I had really discovered something which might prove a help to you. What could be more natural than for one man to make the attack, a confederate being at the corner, say, with a swift horse?" She threw herself back upon her cushions and uttered a low mellow laugh, then turned toward them again. "Gentlemen, really I can't quite give up my little ready-made theory. I thought it was almost a *clue.*" She made a forward movement as if to address her coachman, then turned again. "Since there is nothing to corroborate this fancy of mine, Mr. Carton, please promise me not to use my name, or this bit of meaningless information; at least, not until you find something more, some connecting link; and if that should happen," she turned a flashing glance now full upon the admiring sheriff, "please let me hear; that *is*—"

As she paused, Carton said quickly:

"You would not refuse to aid us with your testimony if it were needed, would you, Miss Wardell?"

"*I!* That is what I was trying to *say.* It would not be pleasant, but I *could* not refuse, if justice demands it. Only, Mr. Carton, should this happen, do not let them take me unawares. You understand me. What is it they do with unwilling witnesses? *I* shall not be an unwilling witness, you know. Give me some sort of personal notice, will you not?"

The eyes, the smile, and the words, were all directed towards Sheriff Carton, and—while he was bowing, and promising that she should not be annoyed, and, if it came to a subpœna, that it should be served by his own hands—she drew back in her seat, pulled the light carriage duster about her, and said, in an undertone:

"Ready, James."

In another moment she had murmured her thanks, bowed, first to Liscom and then to the sheriff, while the handsome horses, slyly "touched up" by the ready coachman, were prancing and pawing, and before either of the two men could detain her by a word, she was being whirled away, the dust from the carriage wheels blown back and about them as they turned toward the terrace.

"Well," said Doctor Liscom, a smile lurking beneath his grey mou-

stache, "you have had your wish; you have seen Miss Wardell, and have heard her story."

"Yes," glancing askance at his companion; "a deuced fine woman."

"But," added the doctor, "it's rather a pity you didn't embrace so good an opportunity and put those 'leading questions' you thought it so important to ask."

The sheriff stole another quick side glance at his host, and shot out from between his teeth one word:

"Opportunity!"

For some moments, Miss Wardell wore the smile which she had worn in parting from the two officers of the law. Then, as it faded, she murmured to herself:

"That was very well. I fancy it may save me some annoyance."

As she turned into the Avenue and drove eastward, dusk was falling, and showing dimly the outlines of the bank upon the one hand, and the church opposite. And now, the eyes which she turned from the one to the other were sombre, and the lips unsmiling. The crowd, which all day had lingered about the bank, was now dispersed; only the men on guard remaining. They were putting up the heavy shutters at the windows of the room where the inquest had been held, and she could see, by the fitful glimmer within, that someone was lighting the lamps.

"I wish I dared go in there," she whispered, and then shuddered and turned her gaze for a moment upon the stately church, only to shudder again, and turn away a face that showed pallid in the growing dusk.

"Drive on, James," she said petulantly. "Drive to the front."

At the front entrance, Miss Wardell sprang lightly from her victoria, and paused for a moment to bow blithely to a lady and gentleman who were passing, mounted, and at a slow trot. Her big St. Bernard came forward to meet her in stately fashion, and she paused again to caress his huge head, and speak to him in playful tones.

But once within and the door closed behind her, she fled up the stairway like one pursued, and, entering her own room, closed and locked the door with nervous haste; her hands were trembling, her face wore a look that was close akin to terror, and she flung off her picturesque hat, and threw herself face downward across her lace-draped bed, muttering between short, quick breaths:

"Thank Heaven! oh, how *horrible* it has been! I could not have endured it another moment! I *could not!*"

. . . . . .

Meantime the shutters had been tightly closed in Pomfret Bank, and the place was brightly lighted. The body of poor Joe Matchin had been carried to one of the lesser offices, the doors had been barred against all intruders, and Detective Ferriss Murtagh was standing before Mr. Baird, hands in pockets, wig and beard laid aside, and a look of satisfaction upon his face.

"At last," he said, spreading his feet wide apart, "the decks are cleared, thanks to that coroner of yours, and we are ready for business. The circumlocution office is closed. Now, sir, fire away."

The banker met his eye and smiled grimly. "I presume you had an object in asking me to shut everybody out and give you your fling here; suppose you make that object plainer."

"Oh, very well." Murtagh swung himself about briskly. "You see I didn't have any too much time here this afternoon before the inquest, and might have overlooked something. I believe you said that there were no evidences of robbery, that nothing had been disturbed?"

"I did."

"Umph!"

Murtagh placed his hand upon the iron lattice which formed the door of the cashier's railed enclosure.

"Will you please unlock this?" he said.

The banker complied in silence, the surprise deepening upon his face. There was a lamp burning in a wall bracket near them. The detective took it from its place, and passed inside the railing.

"Come in," he said, approaching the square safe at the back, and holding the light so that its rays streamed upon the steel doors.

"What is kept in here, Mr. Baird?"

"Very little, save papers of value, ours and others—papers which we did not care to keep in the vault, which was opened every day."

"And no money?"

"Very little money."

"And you say it has not been tampered with?"

"No; it is just as I left it yesterday at four o'clock."

"Are you *sure?*" The detective held the light closer, and bent toward the lock. "It has not been *opened*, I grant you, but *tried*—yes. Look here, and here, and here; look closely—they are tiny scratches, but they are there, and recently made. The lock has been tampered with, you see! Besides—" he touched his finger gingerly upon the steel surface, "they have used wax; you can feel it. Yes, sir; the combination has been tried, and very systematically, too." He turned from the safe and went out and across the room swiftly. "Come here," he said, before the banker could utter comment or question; "let's take a look at *this*."

He paused and held the lamp close to the door of the vault built into the inner wall.

"Have *you* opened this since the murder?" he asked suddenly.

"I—no; why—"

"Wait. And you think you have *not* been robbed? Well—at any-rate, *this vault has been opened.*"

"Good heavens, man! How can you say that?" cried the amazed and alarmed banker. "The combination—"

"The combination is one that could not be opened by anyone who does not know the magic words? This safe is a Sphinx, eh?"

"Yes."

"And, of course, you and your partners selected the ten words by which alone it can be opened?"

"Yes."

"To how many are these words known?"

"To myself, the cashier who is and has been ill, almost at death's

door, in fact, for ten days; to Mr. Deering, who is the president, and absent now because of ill health; to Deering's son and to Deering's nephew."

"Ah! And that is all?"

"That is all."

"Still, the safe *has been opened.* When was it opened last by way of business?"

"It was not opened after noon of yesterday; all books and papers are kept in the smaller safe."

"And when was the place last swept out?"

Mr. Baird's face expressed his surprise, but he answered promptly:

"Matchin always swept out as soon as we left the bank; he was not fond of early morning labours."

"Just so. He swept out, then, early last evening; but he did not dust the ironwork; and when the assassin came he found these little knobs and plates lightly coated with dust. My eyes are trained to see small things, Mr. Baird. This afternoon the traces were quite distinct. The shoulders of the crowd have removed much of the dust; but still, high up, too high for the shoulders, see, the plates and the buttons have been well cleaned by the fingers that pressed upon them in searching for the combination. Will you open your vault, Mr. Baird?"

The banker stood for a moment startled and silent; then he made a forward movement.

"Why not?" he said almost harshly.

When the massive door swung slowly open, and the key had been fitted into the lock of the inner door of tight steel plates, Mr. Baird turned to look at his companion. The detective had drawn noiselessly back, until he stood leaning against the iron cage on the opposite side of the room. He smiled, but did not speak.

Then came a sharp click, the creak of the opening inner door, and, after a moment of utter silence, a quick exclamation from Mr. Baird.

"What is it?" asked the detective without moving.

"You were right. There *has* been robbery."

"Ah!" cried the other, coming quickly forward, "I was *sure* of it."

CHAPTER VII.

"HIS LIFE IS IN OUR HANDS."

THE vault had been robbed; that much was revealed at the first glance; and now, while with the lamp held high, they look again within, they make yet another discovery.

In a shadowy corner, placed almost upright, is a hatchet, short but heavy. Its edge is bright and keen, clean too, as if newly sharpened; but the back and the handle are smeared with blood.

The detective pounces upon it at once; but the banker shrinks away with a gasp of horror.

"*My hatchet!*" he exclaims. "And it has killed poor Joe."

"Yours?"

"Yes. I gave it to Joe several days ago; he was a tinker, handy about such things. He always looked after our tools, and would have resented it if we had given such jobs to anyone else. It was ready, for he told me so yesterday. If I had only taken it away!"

The face of the detective was grave. He put the ugly weapon down, near the open door of the vault. "Make sure about your losses," he said peremptorily, "and let's get on; things are growing ugly." He turned away from the vault and seated himself by the table which the coroner had used earlier in the day.

In a few moments the banker, lamp in hand, came out from the vault, and placed the light upon the table.

"They have taken just thirty thousand dollars, in bank bills, that were made up in packages ready to go out at the call of Ransom & Sons, grain buyers, and also some small rolls of gold, probably three thousand more."

Murtagh got up, took up the blood-stained hatchet, and put it back as he had found it in the corner of the vault.

"You are sure there is nothing else?" he asked.

"Quite so."

"Then close the vault."

He waited, standing near, while this was done; then, moving to the rear of the room and stopping beside a closed register, he said:

"Will you please bring the lamp here?"

Mr. Baird complied in silence.

"It's surprising," said the detective, "to see how blind people can be in times of excitement such as this has been." He bent over the register and opened the slide. He had brought with him, when entering, a slender twig, a little more than a foot long, plucked from an apple tree, and with a small prong setting out at its heaviest end like a hook; this he held in his hand, and he now bent down, and inserting the hooked end through the open work of the register, pushed it a little way down and drew up something which he caught between his finger and thumb, and pulled out gingerly. "This article," he said, "I saw through the iron open work this afternoon when Mr. Deering was here with me. I contrived to push it further down, and to close the register. It may be nothing; but, again, it *may* be a clue to the murderer. Ah!" He had shaken out as he uttered the last word what seemed, at first glance, like an oblong piece of white cloth, soiled and blood-stained, but, upon closer view, proved to be the half of a fine linen handkerchief.

Holding the fragment as nearly as possible in the folds in which he had found it, he carried it to the table, and there the two men bent over it, while Murtagh opened it out slowly and at last spread it flat upon the table.

"Ah!" he again ejaculated suddenly, and the banker bent nearer to look. In one corner, which had escaped both grime and blood-stain, the two men saw, by the light which Murtagh now held close, two initials worked in an odd and fanciful pattern, in the tiniest of stitches, and these two initials were B. D.

Mr. Baird groaned aloud and dropped upon the nearest chair, and,

leaving the hateful fragment still outspread between them, the detective seated himself opposite him.

For a long moment neither spoke; then the expert, bending toward his companion, with his elbows resting upon his knees, looked him full in the face.

"Mr. Baird," he began, in low, firm tones, "let us settle this matter at once. You and I must understand each other."

"Yes?" replied the banker, without lifting his eyes from the thing upon the table. And then as the younger man was silent, and sat keenly scanning his troubled face, he added, as if the words were forced from him, "Go on."

"*You* sent for me, Mr. Baird, and at this present time I am under *your* orders." He paused.

"Yes?" said the banker once more.

"To-day, a few hours ago, you told me you wanted me *to help you find the murderer of that old man.*"

"Yes."

"That you meant to leave no stone unturned, to omit nothing; to pass by no clue which might aid in the work."

"True." The eyes were still upon the ugly bit of linen.

"Is this still your wish?"

Suddenly the eyes were uplifted; the old man's white head reared itself. The clenched right hand came down, with unlooked for force, upon the corner of the table. "Yes!" he cried, "it is! I care nothing for the thirty thousand! I'd give that, doubled, to have poor Matchin alive among us again; I *want* his death avenged; but I'd rather lose all that this bank contains than to see this damnable chain of horrible circumstantial evidence coiling tighter and tighter about a man who has been almost like a son to me! whose father was my best friend, and who has lived in my sight for years, upright, truthful, industrious—a credit to himself and his friends. Lysander Deering will mourn sincerely for poor old Matchin, and will care not a whit for the loss of the money. But—this awful blow—this blot upon a proud old name!—it will break his heart! It will kill him!"

He had risen to his feet in his excitement, and the detective put out his hand, as if to stem the flow of his words, and said:

"Pray resume your seat, Mr. Baird"—(when Ferriss Murtagh was polite, he was polite in the good, old-fashioned, if somewhat high-flown manner)—"I am glad you have said all this; very glad! You and I must understand each other; let us not beat about the bush. We are both thinking of the same man—of Mr. Bruce Deering. Is it not so?"

"Yes!" The banker sank into his seat again.

"And do you wish to shield him—if it can be done—because he is the son of your old friend?—because you fear the effect of an exposure upon the life or health of your partner?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Or, do you believe he is not guilty? In short, why do you wish to screen him?"

"Great heavens! man, who said that I wished to screen him?"

The detective smiled.

"This is folly, Mr. Baird. The whole aim of the afternoon was to keep back, to choke off any questions, any testimony which might reflect upon that young man. You *all* worked for it! The business of this afternoon was much more to shield Bruce Deering than to fix upon the destroyer of your old janitor! You *all* worked for that end —yourself, the coroner, the two young lawyers, even the parson! *I* did not need to be told this; and your sheriff, with the aid of that fellow Wiggins, very nearly upset your plans. Of course you can't expect to keep this up! Once more, did you send for me *to find the murderer?* or to help you to screen your young friend?"

"Help me to screen him! Man, do *you* believe Bruce Deering guilty?"

"Do you?"

"No! a thousand times no! If I did, I would not lift a hand to 'screen' him, though he were my own son!"

"And does the coroner share your belief in his innocence?"

"Yes! Doctor Liscom is a man of truth and honour."

"And the young lawyers?"

"They were Bruce Deering's classmates; they *swear* by him!"

Ferris Murtagh got up, and coming around the table, stood before him.

"Mr. Baird, to-night I am in *your* employ; to-morrow, unless we decide the question otherwise to-night, I may be thrown into contact with your sheriff. If this is the case, and if my services are claimed for the county, I must follow up the clues that are placed before me. And—I believe your sheriff means to hunt young Deering down."

"I know he does," groaned the banker.

"Then here is the question: do I work for *you*, and to save young Deering? or, do I join the hunt, which will surely be afoot to-morrow, for your janitor's murderer? or shall I go back to the city?"

"I—I don't understand you."

"It is simple! To-night I am here at your call. I am free to enter *your* individual service, in which case I should demand perfect freedom, and work for your young friend; seeking, in the meantime, for the truth concerning the murder. In this case I should not wish to be made known to the sheriff, your prosecuting attorney, or to anyone. If, as you at first intended, you make me known to your officers here, my hands are tied. I must work with them, for them, in a measure; do you understand me now?"

"I think so. In part at least. And how about those who have already met you?"

"They are Deering's friends, you say. Are they not to be trusted?"

"Oh, entirely!"

"Then take them into your confidence, or tell them I have withdrawn from the case, as you think best. Look here, Mr. Baird, I've only been in Pomfret a few hours, but, I've had my eyes and ears open! That s my business, and I tell you there's some dark days coming for young Deering! Has he any enemies among folks of his own sort?"

"Do you mean among gentlemen?"

"Yes—or—ladies."

"Not one, I honestly believe. Bruce Deering is a little too re-

served, too attentive to his own business, too self-assertive, and—yes, too self-respecting, to be one of your downright popular fellows. I daresay you understand me. But he's one of the sort who grows upon you ; the better you know him the better you like him. His best is not all on the surface. Enemies?—no. I can't think he has *one!*"

"And I'm *sure* he has! In any town like this there is always an element, made up, mostly, of a mixture of the ignorant, the unsuccessful, and the vicious, and when someone who stands socially above this class, meets with misfortune, these people, from being simply indifferent, or slightly envious, become actually inimical ; not because of any personal reason, but because it pleases them to see one of their social superiors brought down. There are people who have been worked upon by this man Wiggins."

"Ah!" broke in the banker, "I remember. Wiggins was defeated not long ago in a trifling lawsuit, and Deering was the lawyer who won the case for his opponent : Wiggins is accounted a spiteful fellow, and a worthless one."

"Yes, yes! Now, about your sheriff. Is he a friend of Deering's?"

"Carton?" Mr. Baird looked perplexed. "Really, I don't know how to put it. Socially they are seldom thrown together. They're not men of the same sort. Carton's a man of business, and a good one. Deering—well, you see he's a man of business, and something more—" he broke off abruptly. The detective was smiling.

"I understand, sir. People talk of democracy, and prate of freedom and equality. And they say that in America there's no aristocracy. But in every town and village in this blessed country there's at least *two* classes, and in most *three*. No aristocracy!—why, man, as long as there are college-bred men and men uneducated, well-bred men and boors, in the same community, each will cleave to his kind, and there'll be two classes. We may prate of freedom, and we're all equally free ; but we're equal in nothing else. The man of culture instinctively seeks his own kind. And the man who has learned how to read the newspapers, and can keep his accounts, but has never turned the last leaf, even at the grammar school, knows and feels, if he does not admit, that there's a difference! Why, good heavens! there's aristocracy even among dogs and cats, horses and cattle! Do you place your fine roadster upon a par with your coloured brother's wry-necked, spavined, halting old nag? Or your fine hound with the mongrel at the street corner? Blood may be of value, or it may not ; but breeding tells. Young Deering is a gentleman in trouble, and the men who are most likely to do him an injury, or least likely to come to his aid, will be the men who will not admit, but who recognise, the difference between them! I do not know your sheriff, but your face tells me that he has no desire to make things easy for young Deering."

The banker took a turn or two across the room, then—

"You talk as if the danger for Bruce Deering were not over," he said. "I thought the great risk for him was successfully tided over at the inquest."

"You are mistaken. He will be brought before your grand jury, I firmly believe. Why, man, look at the items already known to some, and at this moment in rapid circulation!" Checking them off upon

his fingers: "First, he is the man who first discovers the murder —he gives the alarm? Very true, but there is blood upon his linen, upon his hand, upon his cheek. Enough there to cause a man's arrest; but that is not the worst. The dead man, struggling to make some statement, pronounces his name. And those who hear the evidence which those two young men *must give* before a grand jury will believe that it was *not* incoherent ravings—will certainly believe that they were trying to screen young Deering."

"Oh! but what do *you* think? What is your opinion? Do *you* believe Bruce Deering guilty?"

"No."

"And why?"

"For a simple reason. When I found that torn bit of linen you were in the room, but looking out of the window—"

"Because you had directed my attention outside! Ah, I understand!"

"Precisely. I had seen a speck of something white through the lace-work of the grate, and wanted a chance to conceal it more effectually, which I did. Then I asked you to send me Mr. Bruce Deering."

"Well?"

"Well, he came; and, while talking with him, I stepped suddenly to the register and made a movement as if I had discovered something, at the same time exclaiming sharply. He looked surprised, came straight forward, and bent down with the manner of one who looks to see something new or interesting. When I drew back and turned away he asked what I had seen. 'Nothing,' I answered him; 'I had made a mistake—'"

"Well, I don't see how that—"

"Wait! That bit of linen was put where we found it *by the murderer.* If the murderer had seen me about to unearth it, he would not have worn that look. I have sprung many a trap upon suspected and guilty men. Not even a cool and hardened criminal could have looked like that."

"And that is your only reason for believing in his innocence?"

"For *me* that is enough."

They were both silent for a moment, then—

"What do you want to do?" asked the banker.

"What do *you wish* done?"

"I wish you to look after the interests of Deering, and to hunt for the guilty man, or men, in the way you think best."

"And the sheriff?"

"If what you say is true, he will take matters into his own hands to-morrow morning."

"Oh! you *do* know your man!"

"Have you any plans?"

"Listen. In the morning you will do well to take the initiative; don't let Carton look for you. Hunt him up bright and early, and tell him to take things into his own hands, stipulating only that you consult together. Let him see how much you rely upon his shrewdness; and, if no one else takes up the cry, try and persuade him that he is

detective enough, that another might only disarrange his plans. He has plenty of faith in himself."

"Hum. You certainly know him!"

"In the meantime—don't you want a servant, gardener, coachman—general factotum?" The eyes of the two men met.

"I see!" murmured the banker, "I *shall* have a vacancy in my staff—to-morrow." Both men smiled.

"Very good. Explain matters to the parson and the two lawyers, and tell them never under any circumstances to approach me. That is all for to-night. Now let Carton do his worst, and I—"

"Will do your best," said the banker. "I am sure of it."

He put out his hand, and, over the spot where poor Joe Matchin had breathed his last sigh, they clasped hands. Then Murtagh turned to the table and took up the bit of linen. "What shall be done with this?" he asked. "It's a damning piece of circumstantial evidence."

"True! Understand yourself as in command, Mr. Murtagh. Do with it what you will."

The detective promptly folded it, and put it in his pocket. "It won't do to leave it with *you*," he said. "What about the robbery, Mr. Baird?"

"About that my mind is already made up. I shall not mention it. It lies between you and me; but the hatchet—that troubles me."

"It need not. It is worth little as a clue. It was your tool, found here on the premises; we all know how the victim was killed; let it remain where it is until you can remove it. You are right not to speak of the robbery yet. If Bruce Deering knew the combinations of that vault, there is an array of evidence against him which would hang him in spite of everything. Deering's life is literally *in our hands*."

CHAPTER VIII.

"AND COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOWS BEFORE."

WITHIN the week which followed the unsatisfactory coroner's inquest, Pomfret was stirred out of its usual well-bred apathy, so many strange things came to pass.

First of all, Sheriff Carton lived up to the expectations of Ferriss Murtagh. At eight o'clock on the morning which followed the interview between Murtagh and Mr. Baird, the latter drove to the house of Doctor Liscom, who, with some difficulty, had persuaded Carton to be his guest.

"You'll be annoyed horribly, Carton, if you go to an hotel," the coroner argued. "And my office will afford you a much better place in which to hold interviews with the people you'll need to see. Stay here at least until you have laid out your campaign." And the sheriff, with some reluctance, had remained. This had been decided upon while Mr. Baird was closeted with Murtagh, and when the former reached his home he found a note from the coroner awaiting him.

"Acting upon your advice," it said, "I have persuaded Carton, a little against his will, to remain with me for the present; will try and keep him until I hear further from you.—LISCOM."

Upon leaving the bank, Mr. Baird had told Murtagh how to reach his house by a roundabout and retired route. "You may as well go straight there," he said; "it will be safer than to go about in so small a town. No one seems to have thought of sending for a detective yet. This is a slow town, and murder takes us with our wits wool-gathering; besides, Carton is thought by the multitude to be equal to anything. Luckily, I dismissed the man who has had charge of my stables a week ago, and the man who was to replace him is not due for two days; can't you take his place? it's no sinecure. I'm a lover of good horses and keep a number."

"It's the very thing," declared the detective. "I'm something of a jockey myself. Can't you hold the other fellow off."

"Easily, by paying him a month's wages. He's always sure of a place."

"Then I'm your master of the horse," said Murtagh, and so the matter was settled.

Murtagh arrived at the house almost as soon as the banker himself, although his way was strange, and had been longer; and he was brought, by his new master's order, directly to the library.

"According to your suggestion," said Mr. Baird, without loss of time, "I gave Liscom a hint about detaining Carton. I have just received this note from him."

The detective glanced over the note.

"No."

"Have you answered him?" he asked.

"Then tell him to hang on to Carton, and let us drop in there as early as possible in the morning. I'll drive you down."

. . . . . .

When Mr. Baird was driven up to the coroner's gate by his smart new groom, Carton was already astir and about to set out for town; evidently he was eager to be at work.

"Up in the morning and got his teeth filed," muttered the new man, sitting erect upon the light road waggon. "I fancy there's a very unpleasant six months or more in store for that good-looking young lawyer. Carton has got the case settled already from A to Z. There's no 'happy medium' to these country 'executives'; they're either straight out, square, and bold as lions, or they're headstrong, opinionated, and generally N G!"

He waited half-an-hour, driving the handsome chestnuts slowly to and fro within sight of the coroner's office windows, and then Mr. Baird came out, alone and hastily, with a sober face.

"Well?" said the seeming coachman.

"Well, it's worse than you predicted. Carton sees in this case the direct road to glory. He won't spare poor Deering, and he'll be down upon him without loss of time. I almost quarrelled with the fellow; rather I *did* quarrel with him. Why, he wants to put that poor boy under arrest. *Under arrest*, sir! At *once!*"

"Of course he does! I knew it."

"Well, *I* didn't! I was thoroughly amazed. Arrest Bruce Deering! As if he couldn't give bail for any amount! As if even *that* was necessary! His simple word of honour is good enough for a better man than Cyrus Carton."

"Is Deering rich, then?" queried the detective, smiling slightly at the banker's excited manner.

"He is not poor. But I didn't mean that. Yes, he could be his own bondsman. He has fifty thousand dollars invested with us, his mother's legacy. But his uncle would stand for him, for any sum, and, confound it, so would I. What's to be done now?"

"How did you leave matters? Does Carton still hunger to arrest on suspicion?"

"Oh, he's hungry enough; but I think he won't quite venture so far yet. He's going in for a grand system of surveillance. He means to set a watch upon the railway stations, the public highways, the livery stables; upon Deering's rooms; upon Beechwood; upon me, for all I know."

The detective actually chuckled.

"Going to use the police? or employ amateurs?—"

"Going to swear in a lot of deputies, so he says. And going to put them under heavy bonds."

"Humph! Anything more?"

"Oh, yes. He means to see Deering personally, and extort his word of honour; put him under oath."

"He's a daisy!" grinned the detective.

"He's a coarse, underbred fellow," retorted the thoroughly-aroused old man, and then, a moment later, he said in quite another tone, "I'm going to see him at once. Take me there."

"You are speaking of Deering?"

"Of course. He must be prepared. Will it be of any use for you to see him too?"

"Not now, later, perhaps. I shall want to see him before they arrest him."

The banker started.

"Do you think that will really come about?"

"Unless the true assassin is found before the grand jury meets, that will certainly happen." Murtagh pulled up the horses and held them down to a walk, while he went on, "Can't we take a turn somewhere and drive past this place, Beechwood, his uncle's place? I want to see it—and to ask you a few questions."

The banker indicated the route, and the detective began his inquiries.

"About this uncle. You say you don't want him to hear of this trouble so long as it can be kept from him. Would not his influence be worth something here just now? How do uncle and nephew stand toward each other? Tell me something about the man."

"Judge Deering," the other began, "is an old citizen. Upright, respected, and wealthy. Bruce Deering is the son of his younger brother, and the woman who was Lysander Deering's first love. Lys Deering, as he was called in those days, loved Kate Montfort as, I believe, he never again loved any woman; but he resigned her like a

man, when he saw that Dick loved her too, and that she cared for Dick. Two years after Dick and Kate were married, Lys married a pretty little Virginian, and it was more than whispered, and more than half believed, that it was, on his part, a marriage out of pity. Lys was a chivalrous soul, and the little woman certainly did love him devotedly and showed it but too plainly. Geneve was frail from the beginning; and, six months after they were married, he took her to Italy, and they spent a year and more between Italy, the Grecian Isles, and the South of France. Their son, Brookfield, was born in France. He was named after his maternal grandfather. The Brookfields were all very proud of their old name, but they were not so proud of the taint which broke out from time to time, sometimes lying dormant for two generations, but always to be feared and always returning." He stopped and sighed.

"What taint?" asked Murtagh.

"The taint of insanity. Mrs. Deering died when her son was hardly a year old—died melancholy mad. Few know this fact. And Lys Deering has always carefully kept the ugly secret. His son, Brook, is a handsome fellow, somewhat delicate, but without his mother's looks, except that he has light hair, like hers, and a fair skin like a girl's."

"And this son, where is he?"

"Brook has been in Europe for more than two years. But I will finish my family history. Deering came back to Beechwood with his young son and a nurse, and opened the old home, and, in just two years, his brother's wife died of a malignant fever, and Dick himself nearly lost his life. Lys went to him, stayed by him, and, when he was able to be moved, brought him to Beechwood, with his young son, then not quite two years old. Dick never really rallied. He had lost a lovely baby girl and his wife within less than a year of each other, and he fairly worshipped little Bruce, who was named after Kate Montfort's twin brother, long ago dead. The child was the living image of his mother, and I think that Lys was drawn to love him for this reason quite as well as he loved his own son. Well, when the war broke out, both brothers enlisted. Lys was wounded before he had seen six months of service, was promoted for gallantry on the field, and then honourably discharged. Dick was wounded, too, at Chickamauga, and again Lys went to him. He brought him home again, but this time it was in his coffin. Dick left his boy to Lys, asking him to keep him and rear him as his own for the sake of Kate Montfort, whom they had both loved. See, there is Beechwood."

There was silence between them for a moment, then the detective asked:

"And have they lived alone in that fine place, those three, since then?"

"No, no! About ten years ago an old friend of Deering's left him another living legacy, this time, a girl, an only daughter, motherless, and an heiress. Deering was summoned to New York, and there he found his charge, and his dying friend, in the home of that friend's younger sister, who had, of her own, a family of five to rear and educate. This sister was a widow in moderate circumstances, and George

Rodney left her a generous sum. He also left a fine gift in real estate to Deering, who accepted it for friendship's sake only, but he left the bulk of his fortune to little Valentine, then a miss eight years of age. Well, to shorten my story, the sister, Mrs. Flood, had a daughter two years older than Miss Valentine, and the two girls were warm friends. Of course, they saw each other often; little Miss Flood made long visits at Beechwood, and finally the two were sent to the same school. Then, at seventeen, Brenda Flood married, and lived unhappily for just a year with her handsome scamp of a husband, who was killed in a game of polo before he had found time to squander more than half of a large fortune. Brenda had always loved Beechwood, had been very happy there, and so it was not very strange if, in due time, the big house, so long without a mistress, became her home, and Lysander Deering her husband. She is a beautiful woman, and she makes him very happy. Valentine has been out of school a year now, and the three—Deering, his wife, and Miss Rodney—have been in New York for some weeks."

"But you have not told me why Mr. Deering must not be sent for?"

"True. Deering has lately been afflicted with heart disease; a long dormant case, the doctors say, and developed with singular suddenness, considering how even and care-free his life has been for many years. Liscom, who made the first examination, says that, if he did not know the absurdity of the notion, he should say the trouble had been matured thus rapidly by some sudden shock or trouble. Deering has gone to consult an eminent physician, being exceedingly anxious to know his exact condition. He writes me that they tell him he must be guarded from any sudden shock, and must take no violent exercise; in short, must be watched and tended, instead of being, as he has always been, the guardian and protector. It has been a hard blow for him, but he bears it manfully. No, I *wouldn't* like this to be broken to him suddenly; I wrote him last night concerning Matchin, telling him that he is *dead;* and, later, I shall tell him *how* he died. But he must not be told how Bruce is menaced until things look more hopeful—or, the assassin is found."

"I see, I see," murmured Murtagh, and turned his horses cityward.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DEERINGS.

BRUCE DEERING bore the news which Mr. Baird brought him, manfully, with high courage.

"I expected it must happen," he said. "I don't deny that it hurts. And I feel, somehow, that the worst is yet to come. But I am not the first innocent man who has been charged with a crime; I shall not be the last. I hope you will keep this from my uncle as long as possible."

"I mean to. At the same time I am glad that the ladies are with him. I have been thinking that it might be well to write to Miss

Rodney and give her a word of warning. She is so bright and so clear-headed, she might keep some stray newspapers from telling him too much."

A wave of colour swept over the young man's cheek. "Miss Rodney is not in New York," he said, with his face averted.

"Not—"

"She left New York two weeks ago," went on the young man. "She is in Baltimore."

"Ah! With her cousin?"

"Yes."

"I think I will write to her. I wish she were in New York. *Some* one ought to know the truth and be prepared to break it to Deering when the time comes."

Bruce opened his lips as if about to differ from him, then:

"I'm glad he is not here," he said; "*I* don't want to be the cause of any shock or injury to Uncle Lys. That would be worse than the rest."

The banker looked at him admiringly.

"Some men in your place would think of self only at such a crisis as this," he said.

. . . . . .

Sheriff Carton was as good as his word. No grass was permitted to grow under the feet that went to and fro, raising up barriers between Bruce Deering and the world beyond Pomfret. Within twenty-four hours after his talk with the banker in the coroner's office, all outlets were guarded, and, to do him justice, the work was thoroughly done.

"There will be a deal of useless watching," said Bruce Deering when he heard of this. "I shall not stir from my place in Pomfret. They will not have to search for me when I am wanted."

When the knowledge that Valentine Rodney was in Baltimore suggested to Mr. Baird the idea of writing to her, he went at once to his study intent upon this; but after a moment's thought he touched the bell and sent for his new man.

Murtagh, who had been comfortably established in snug rooms over the carriage house, came promptly; and when he had heard his employer's idea, said at once:

"I suppose you hope, by informing this young lady of the facts, to induce her to go back to New York of her own accord. You think that two women may accomplish what one cannot."

"I know that Brenda is constantly with her husband; while Valentine, having more freedom, might intercept unpleasant or dangerous messages before they reach Deering."

"Then," said the detective, "don't write her; telegraph. Did you telegraph to Mr. Deering?"

"By no means. I wrote. I would have sent such news by stage it it were possible."

"Then telegraph the young lady by all means."

. . . . . .

Valentine Rodney, light of heart, and with a song upon her lips was coming leisurely downstairs, on her way to luncheon, a charming

picture in a dainty tea-gown, when a servant handed her a telegram, and the song died upon her lips.

"Uncle Lys!" she faltered, and tore open the envelope with trembling fingers, to read these words:

"Matchin murdered in bank. Bruce D—— accused of crime. Your uncle must not be told of last. Letter follows.—BAIRD."

She stood still for a moment, with the paper held tightly in her hand, her face pallid. Then she went slowly downstairs. A moment after she entered the little morning-room, where luncheon was spread, and said to her cousin, while she took her place at the table,

"Bess, I must start for New York in an hour. Wait; let me finish. I am needed there; Uncle Lys is in an unsafe condition. I have just received a telegram with the information. Jane is packing for me; but I can't wait for any baggage. You will please send it to-night, and, Bess, I look for a letter from Pomfret—an important letter; please send *that* without delay. Give me a cup of tea, and don't make me talk, Bess dear; I'm worried."

"You poor thing!" said kindly Cousin Bess. "You *do* think so much of him."

"*I!*" Valentine's face flushed hotly. "Bess, how *dare* you?"

"How dare I say that you love Uncle Lys! Why, Val! *Oh, Val Rodney! Whom* did you think I *meant?*"

"Be quiet, Bess. I—I was not paying attention! I did not—understand!" cried Valentine, and sweet-natured Cousin Bess changed the subject.

. . . . . .

It was nearing evening of the second day, following upon the murder of Joe Matchin, when Lysander Deering and his fair young wife came in from a drive through Central Park, and entered the little reception room of their luxurious suite in one of New York's princely hotels. The day had been a perfect one, the drive exhilarating, and the pair were in a happy mood.

"A fine-looking man"—that was the phrase oftenest applied to Lysander Deering when he appeared among strangers. His hair had whitened when he was yet young, but his eyes were bright, his fine face almost without a wrinkle, and his tall form erect, and well-filled out, without portliness, in spite of the newly-developed and menacing disease, which, as yet, had made no inroad upon flesh and colour, and but little upon strength.

Fair and stately was the young wife at his side, and a certain sweet and sober dignity, a natural womanliness of movement and gesture served, or seemed, to lessen the difference in their ages—a difference which one who was much with them soon grew to forget, such good comrades they were; so much there was in common between them. And small wonder, for Lysander Deering possessed a richly stored mind, and he had early seen, in the little friend of his saucy ward, a rare nature, with a grasp and strength of mind beyond her years. When, in those days, he gave Valentine dolls, he gave to Brenda books; and both girls were satisfied. As Brenda grew older he was not disappointed in the estimate he had made of her mental ability; and now

he found in her, not only a beautiful and devoted wife, but a charming companion as well.

"How well I feel, Princess!" he said, using the title which he had bestowed upon her in her childhood, and which suited her so well that it had almost usurped her name upon the lips of those who loved her. "I feel strong too." He had been walking about the room, as if not yet ready to forego the pleasure of movement, and was watching her with open admiration as she drew off her gloves, and laid aside her dainty bonnet, standing near the low mantel. Turning to place the gloves upon it, she uttered an exclamation—

"A letter," she said, and then after glancing at it; "for you, dear, and—yes—it's Mr. Baird's big clear handwriting."

He threw himself down in a big lounging chair near her.

"Read it aloud," he said.

"Perhaps it's a business letter."

"Well—the doctor has appointed you my man of business. I am not to be worried, you remember," smiling as he held out his hand to her.

As he drew her toward him, she seated herself upon the broad arm of his chair, and deftly removing the envelope, cast her eyes down the open page.

"Then I may think it best not to let you hear it at all," she returned in the same light tone; "you are very much in my power, sir—" she broke off suddenly and with such a queer little sound in her throat, that he started and turned to look at her.

The smile had faded from her face; she looked strangely startled.

"What is it?" he asked quickly.

"Dear," she began, laying her hand upon his shoulder, "promise me that you will not let this excite you. There has been some trouble at the bank—"

"Oh!" At the word "trouble" he had lifted himself erect and an anxious look came into his eyes. "At the *bank?* Then it's nothing wrong at Beechwood or with Bruce?"

"No, dear," taking his hand in hers.

"And Baird must be all right, as that's his writing?"

"Yes." She was looking again at the letter.

"Then, don't fear to tell me what it is, Princess."

"The bank has been attacked, dear."

"Oh!—Well?"

"And Matchin—"

"Matchin sent them about their business, I'll wager."

"He was—hurt."

"Hurt!—wife. There's more to come; don't fear for me. The ruth is best for me now. Read, no, *tell* me the *worst* at once."

"I'll read the passage, dear; it's to the point." She gave him another tender, anxious glance and began:

"It was near midnight that some young men, who had been at a late supper, discovered the bank open, a light within, and poor Matchin lying upon the floor."

"Oh!" His grasp upon her hand tightened; she turned again from the letter to look at him.

"It is very sad, dear."

"Go on, Brenda. Was he *dead?*" His tone was almost stern; she felt no tremor of the hand upon her own, and she read on.

"His face was bloodstained, he had evidently been attacked; he was breathing his last when they found him. They gave the alarm at once. There was no sign of the murderer; all was done that could be, and I sent at once for a detective. Liscom says *you* must not come. All will be done as you would wish it, and you have yourself and *your wife* to think of. I will write you in full to-morrow. The bank has lost thirty odd thousands."

She dropped the letter and took both his hands in hers. He was lying back against the cushions, calm, still, but very pale.

"Dear," she said gently, "if they needed you—if poor Joe Matchin were dying—we would both go to him, poor faithful soul! But, you see, your duty is to yourself, and,—" putting her soft lips to his brow, "and to me. Say that you won't think of going—not yet."

. . . . . .

At nine o'clock Brenda Deering sat near the low couch where her husband lay. The shock of the news, so gently broken, had not been without its effect, and while it had startled him less than she had feared, the very effort to remain calm had left him weary and weaker than he wished to own. He had yielded to her with open reluctance after some argument, and at last, tired, and more nervous and anxious than he would have her know, had allowed himself to be covered with a soft, light rug, and lay with his face turned from the light, not yet asleep, although Brenda had administered a soothing potion, which he had swallowed more willingly than she knew.

She sat beside a softly-shaded lamp, with an open book in her hand, but she was not reading; she was thinking of poor Joe Matchin and his unhappy end.

"Pardon me. May I speak with you a moment?" It was her maid who had entered so quietly, and Brenda bent toward her husband.

"Are you sleeping, dear?"

"No, Brenda, but go to Rose. I shall be sleeping soon, I think." He did not stir, and she dropped a light kiss upon his upturned temple.

"I will be back very soon," she murmured, and followed Rose from the room.

"What is it, Rose?"

The girl put a hand upon her lip, crossed the corridor, and opened the door opposite the little reception room.

"Someone is in there," she whispered.

It was the room lately occupied by Valentine Rodney, and Brenda entered hastily.

"Valentine!"

"Oh, *Brenda!*"

The door shut softly. "That is my part," said Rose to herself as she turned away. "But I wonder what has brought Miss Valentine back so soon?"

"Brenda," said Valentine, when the greetings had been exchanged, "have you heard—"

"About poor Matchin? Yes, dear."

"And uncle? How did he bear it?"

"Better than I dared to hope. He is lying down now, but quite calm. He feels it, though—deeply."

"*Feels it.*"

The girl's face looked wan and strained.

"Heavens! How did you get the news, Brenda?"

"By letter—from Mr. Baird."

"A *letter!* Oh! then, I can hear something more! *I* only had *this.*"

She snatched at something in the pocket of her jacket, and put it in Brenda's hand.

"A *telegram!*" Brenda opened it, looked, gasped, looked again, and uttered a cry. "*Bruce!* Oh, my God; my God!"

"Why?" Valentine caught away the telegram and grasped her cousin firmly by the arm. "Brenda, what does it mean? Did you not *know? What do you know?*"

"Not *that!*" Brenda sank down upon the couch near at hand, and for a moment seemed struggling for self-control, then—

"Mr. Baird wrote us that Joe Matchin had been murdered," she said, "nothing more. Sit here, Val."

Miss Rodney, who had remained standing, with that same drawn look upon her face, moved weakly to her cousin's side, and dropped into the seat indicated.

"I see," she said. "It was to save uncle the shock;" and then for long moments both were silent. At last,

"It is horrible!" murmured Brenda.

"It is *false!*" hissed Valentine. "Oh, Brenda—he said he would write, is there a letter yet?"

"It's too soon, Val. Ah, I understand Mr. Baird. He dared not write the truth, even to *me*, but he *knew you!* He knew you would come if we were in trouble."

"We!" gasped Valentine, and then she flung out her arms, and throwing herself, face downward, across her cousin's lap, sobbed wildly.

When the tempest had subsided, and they could talk more calmly, they tried to imagine the situation, to piece out the hateful story which lay between that letter, which had omitted more than it had told, and the telegram which had told so much, and yet so little.

One thing alone seemed clear to them. They must keep the news from Mr. Deering as long as possible.

. . . . . .

It was very hard to dissemble during the two or three days of comparative quiet which followed. But Lysander Deering was preoccupied, and anxious, and this made him less observant than usual. The letter which was promised him came duly, but, after all, it told very little. A detective was at work, and Carton also; the town was up in arms, and it promised to be a long chase. It was not a very satisfactory letter. And "somehow," Mr. Deering felt and declared, "it seemed to leave out more than it said."

Valentine's letter came also, and this was definite enough. But it only made the two, who must not share the horrors it contained with the anxious invalid, more unhappy. It doubled their watchfulness,

their anxiety, and their fear and dread of the day when they could no longer keep the truth from Lysander Deering.

"Oh!" grieved Brenda, "I fear it so! It will kill him! It will kill him!"

"If I did not feel somehow that we do not *know* Uncle Lys; that he will rise above his own physical self, and be strong for Bruce's sake, I should lose all courage," said Valentine. "Oh, I wish the murderer could be hunted down!"

. . . . . .

It was a week from the day of Joe Matchin's murder, that Valentine entered her cousin's dressing-room one morning and said, without preliminary of any sort,

"Brenda, I am going to Pomfret."

"You!"

"Yes, *I!* Uncle would go if he knew, and could travel. You would go if your place were not here. We are Bruce Deering's nearest friends, and it is time that Pomfret should know that we stand by him. I can't do much, but I can show myself his *friend.*" For a moment the two women faced each other, one face full of earnest admiration, the other pale and haughtily defiant, as if expecting and fearing opposition.

But Brenda Deering threw her arms about her cousin's neck, and kissed her with vehement enthusiasm. "I shall almost die without you, Val," she cried, "but I would not keep you if I could! You are as brave as you are lovely, and I hope—I hope that Bruce Deering being what he *is*, and I being *you*, I should do the same! I will telegraph at once to Mrs. Merton to come home, and to Sarita to open the house, and have the carriage waiting for you."

Valentine could not set out until evening; there were earlier trains, but to go sooner might seem to Mr. Deering too precipitate. Besides, she did not wish to arrive in Pomfret at night. And so at noon they were all together in the little saloon, when a servant of the house entered, and, before they saw what he was about to do, had dropped a letter directly into Mr. Deering's open palm.

Brenda made a little movement forward, but he clasped his fingers about the missive, and smiled as he held it away from her.

"Ah, my policeman, you have been outwitted for once," he said almost gaily, as he glanced down at the letter. "Really! it says, to be *delivered into my own hand!* And it is post marked here, in *New York.*"

Brenda breathed a sigh of relief. Let it be what it would, so long as it were not from Pomfret.

He tore open the brown wrapper and unfolded the sheet, read a few words, and started violently, his face flushing, and then turning deadly white. The two young women looked in alarm at one another, and Brenda arose and stood waiting, in a tremor of anxiety, to learn the meaning of this agitation.

Then, to their terror and amazement, they saw him clench his fist, bring it down heavily upon the arm of his chair, and spring to his feet as lightly as a boy, his face white and set.

"Brenda!" he cried, "ring for John, and tell Rose to pack *at once.*

We go to Pomfret with Valentine! God! *They have accused* BRUCE DEERING *of* MURDER!" The letter fluttered to his feet. He swayed and would have fallen but for the two girls who caught him and placed him again in his chair.

. . . . . .

Two hours later, Brenda stood alone with the great physician whose word she waited with bated breath.

"Doctor, is it possible? Dare we venture? He looks deathly. And you said—"

"I said that a sudden shock would be dangerous; very dangerous. Now, madam, there are people who live, when Nature seems exhausted, purely upon their will. A man's will is sometimes master of his physical self. A strong will is the physician's best friend, and next to a strong will, in certain crises, comes *Pride*. If your husband had learned of the *death* of a dear one, in the same condition in which this news found him, I could not now save him. He might not have survived the first hour. Or, if he were lacking in masterful will power, in strong pride, his life would now be at stake. Mind, I do not now say that he is *safe*. But I *do* say that, having rallied so strangely, and being in his present frame of mind, there is but one thing to do. He *must* not be crossed. It may hurt him to go, but it will be *worse* if he does *not* go. He may reach his home prostrated; but I will not answer for his life if he is thwarted in any way. The shock has already undone the good work of weeks, but, if he is not thwarted now, the worst may be over. These mental shocks work strangely. Sometimes a man like him, carried out of himself, forgetting himself, conquers the flesh by sheer strength of the spirit. We are dealing with such a nature. Besides, when all is said, how can you or *I* restrain him? He is sane, stronger than he has been for days; master, indeed, of the situation."

"Oh! That is true!" she sighed.

"All the same you must not relax your vigilance. You must set out prepared for a break-down. Believe me, dear Mrs. Deering, we can only hope for the best now. The rest is taken out of our hands."

"And we may rely upon your friend?"

"Doctor Ware can do all that I could do and more. He is younger, stronger."

The door opened and Valentine came in with an anxious face.

"Is it settled?" she asked.

"It is settled," said Brenda; "we go, and Doctor Ware goes with us."

. . . . . .

Meantime, in Pomfret on this same day, and at the very hour when the great doctor was pronouncing his dictum, Detective Murtagh, who, for the time, had taken upon himself the name of John Ross, was riding one of Mr. Baird's fine horses about the streets of Pomfret, and leading another. Both animals were blanketed, and as they walked along, lightly guided, there could not have been found a more honest-looking jockey, nor one more efficient, than their rider. He rode with careless ease, swaying to the movement of the horse he bestrode, and he whistled softly as he went. No one could have guessed that he was thinking deeply, earnestly.

He had been a week in Pomfret, and since the evening of the finding of the half handkerchief at the bank, he had been very much *en evidence* at the Baird stables, or riding and driving the Baird horses. Sometimes he drove the banker, and every day he exercised a certain pair of young horses ; and, when he was out with these he was pretty sure to be seen, at some time during the outing, riding slowly past the office of the coroner, the hotel, where Sheriff Carton had established headquarters, the bank, the square of which Miss Wardell's house constituted a corner, and the whole length of Main Street, only pausing and turning about at the south end when he had reached the pretty street which turned off in an eccentric fashion to climb the little hill, at the top of which lived Captain Frazier, the giver of the supper which had caused the presence of certain witnesses upon the scene of Joe Matchin's murder. Going northward, he only turned when he had reached Beechwood, and passed its utmost boundary.

To-day he had nearly finished his ride, and was now moving northward in the direction of Beechwood, when he heard a shrill "halloo" behind him, and, looking back, saw a boy, whom he knew to belong to the staff of the telegraph office, hurrying to overtake him, a yellow envelope in his hand.

Murtagh had not been backward, when he saw an opportunity for making acquaintances without arousing suspicion. And Mr. Baird had already sent him more than once to the telegraph office. So, upon seeing the boy, he stopped promptly, and said good-naturedly—

"Want a lift?"

"Yes." The boy came panting up. "How fur 'er ye goin'?"

"About twenty miles ; where do you want to travel?"

"Shucks ! ye ain't goin' no wheres, but ye might let me ride's fur as Beechwood."

"All right, seeing it's you. But you want to keep mum about it." He had sprung from his horse as he spoke, and he lifted the half-grown boy to the back of the led animal. "Now, stick on, sonny," he said, as he remounted. "Who lives at Beechwood?"

"Ain't much of anybody lives there now," said the boy. "But I guess this 'ere message is ter tell the old woman that someone's comin' home short meter."

At the gate of Beechwood the sham jockey deposited his passenger. "Sorry I can't take you back, sonny," he said ; "but I'm going the other way." He rode on, but, instead of turning about as usual where the road branched to right and left, he turned to the left and rode out of sight behind a high hedge.

Not far, however. He turned back soon, and stopped at the corner, still hidden from the sight of Beechwood by the hedge. Riding close to this, and peering through, he saw his late passenger hastening townward ; and, as he was about to remount, a woman came out at the side door, ran down the steps, and in the direction of the stables.

"Humph !" muttered the detective, "I may be a fool for my pains, but I think I'll wait."

Ten minutes later he saw a small horse attached to a covered phaeton led to the door by a groom, and instantly the woman came out and climbed briskly into the vehicle. He could only see that she

was small and quick of gesture; her face being hidden by a thick grey veil.

As she drove the pony out through the swinging gate, he remounted his horse, and, when she had turned townward, driving at a brisk pace, he followed, not far behind.

Half way to town, a little cloud of dust advancing toward them dissolved, and the detective, now quite close behind the phaeton, saw the mounted figure of a lady galloping toward them; as they neared each other, he saw that the lady was Miss Wardell, and, a moment later, he was forced to pull up his horses with a jerk.

The phaeton had stopped short, and as Miss Wardell drew up her horse beside it, he heard its occupant say, in a decidedly foreign accent,

"Ah! mees, I was going to you this moment."

Miss Wardell stopped her speech with a quick gesture, and the woman became aware, for the first time, that someone was near.

The detective touched his cap as he turned out to pass them, but he managed to make his led horse behave so ill, that he was obliged to turn once and again in the road, so near them that his quick eye saw Miss Wardell pass a small, white something, suspiciously like a note, to the woman in the phaeton.

He could tarry no longer, and so went on, riding at the same slow walk as when he had taken up the messenger-boy.

Not far from the place where the town proper began, with its houses thickly set, he heard the sound of swift hoofs, and Miss Wardell flew past him, and, a moment later, he saw a small figure spring up from the turf beneath a tree, and come out to the road to meet *him*, was his first thought; but the sudden stopping of Miss Wardell's horse undeceived him. He could see that she talked to the lad earnestly for a few moments, and that she put something into his hand.

Then the boy set off at a rapid pace, and she, riding slowly, and keeping near him, followed on, turning to look over her shoulder as she went.

When her face was again turned townward, the detective looked back. The phaeton had turned, and was half-way back to Beechwood. At the first corner Murtagh took a side street, and was rewarded, before he had lost sight of the figures on Main Street, by seeing the lady ride past the messenger with a slight gesture, and put her horse to a brisk canter. Instantly his own horses were at a standstill.

A moment later he turned back, and when he saw the horse and its graceful rider disappear in the direction of her home, he rode boldly after the boy who was yet in sight.

"Hello—I say."

The boy turned and stopped.

"I say, you walked back, haven't you?"

"Yes—"

"Well, did you happen to see a horse-shoe along the road? It's an extra fancy and I hate to lose it; it's bad luck to lose a horse-shoe! Say, get up, and ride back a piece with me, so you can hold these nags if we find it; *I* can't hang on to them both. I won't lose you any time, for I'll take you plum to the office."

The boy "hesitated—and was lost."

There was no horse-shoe found, but Murtagh was rewarded as he had hoped to be.

"Better get up in front of me," he said affably. "We can gallop then."

The boy wore a "roundabout," unbuttoned because of the warmth, and, from a side pocket, where he had seem them placed, Murtagh could see two papers sticking out. Presently he said:

"Look here! I can't guide and look too; you take the reins, and *I'll* keep a sharper look-out."

A moment later the side pocket was empty, a proud boy was guiding the handsome horses with two tightly gripped hands, and, behind him, Murtagh was reading the following harmless telegrams:—

"MESS VALENTINE RODNEY, etc., etc.

"Mrs. Merton in Buffalo. Am alone. What shall I do?

"SARITA."

"MISS VALENTINE RODNEY, etc., etc.

"Just met S——. Much worried. Please come to me. Will meet you.

"ORA WARDELL."

"Well!" said Murtagh to himself as he restored the papers to their place, "the *matter's* simple enough, but the *method!* Hum! and I've heard somebody relate that the two young ladies were at one time rivals! I'd like to see the *other* document. The key, perhaps, is there."

While riding Banker Baird's horses about Pomfret, Mr. Murtagh had found time to elaborate some very strange theories.

CHAPTER X.

A DETECTIVE'S THEORIES.

MR. BAIRD'S family consisted of a wife, one son, and two daughters. The son, a lad of fifteen, was attending a military school, and the daughters were also absent "for their minds' sake." They were bright, ambitious maidens, aged respectively sixteen and eighteen, and they were laying a solid foundation for future wisdom and usefulness at Vassar.

This left Mr. Baird and his lady wife in possession of the big house, and, Mrs. Baird being her husband's closest confidante, and best adviser, had of course been informed of the identity of the "new man."

This being the state of affairs, Murtagh found it easy to confer with the banker in his study, where no one ever thought of intruding.

On the evening of his meeting with the messenger, and his adven-

ture with the telegrams, he appeared in the study earlier than usual, and at once opened his business.

"I fancy you must entertain often, Mr. Baird," he began, "that is, that you often must receive visits, of business or pleasure, from persons at a distance."

"True," replied the banker. He was beginning to know the abrupt ways of his "new man," and had learned that he never indulged in idle talk. Feeling sure, now, that something was afoot, he added, "We do often receive visitors, my wife and I; both have a large circle of relatives, and they are always welcome here."

"Then it would be no unusual thing for your carriage to be at the station, say to-morrow noon, when the through train from eastward comes in?"

"I see you have something in tow, Murtagh. Well, we will look for a guest to-morrow; I suppose you mean to take the carriage down yourself?"

"I would like Jerry to drive, sir. I shall want to be on the platform when the train comes in, where I can look for my—for *your* guest; your 'cousin.' Could you give me the name of a lady, now, a youngish lady, whom you might, with some reason, expect on that train?"

"The plot thickens, I see. Yes, I can help you that much. My wife has a cousin who comes and goes often, and quite at her own sweet will. You may look for *her*."

"Thank you. And now, Mr. Baird, I must take advantage of our compact. I am only working upon possibilities, in this which I have in hand, and, in justice to others, I do not wish to mention names, or to explain—at present."

"That is already settled. When you can bring me something definite, I shall listen with interest. Until then, take your own way, my friend; I shall ask and expect nothing."

. . . . . .

The next day when the noon express drew near the Pomfret station, there might have been seen, among the vehicles gathered near the long platform, two that were especially noticeable. One was a dainty pony phaeton, occupied by a fair and stately brunette, who held the reins with an air of ease and confidence, while she scanned the face of each passenger who alighted from the train, upon the other side of the platform. The other vehicle was the handsome, well-appointed landau, which everybody recognised as that of Mr. Baird, the banker. Mr. Baird's man, Jerry, sat erect upon the driver's seat, and as the passengers stepped down from the train, a person wearing the unmistakable look of one who seeks to identify, in a crowd, an unknown face, was recognised by some as Mr. Baird's "new man."

As he elbowed his way nearer to the drawing-room couch, an elderly gentleman with a pale face and weary air was assisted to the platform by a youngish man, upon one side, and a fair and anxious-faced woman upon the other.

Behind them, with head erect, and lightly tripping step, came another, a lady with dark eyes and a charming, though serious, face.

"Excuse me, miss," said a respectful voice at her elbow, "this is Miss La Mar, is it not?"

The young lady threw back her head, but before she could speak, the first lady turned and caught her by the arm.

"Come, Valentine," she said quickly, "your uncle is *so* tired, and I see the carriage on the other side," and she drew the girl forward, and led the two men around the corner of the station, where, on the other side, the back of the Baird carriage was visible.

In another moment they had turned the corner, and the lady spoke again:

"Oh, it is not our carriage; how unfortunate! They ought to have had our message last evening!"

And then a clear voice called,

"Valentine—Miss Rodney, please step this way! And, is it possible, Mr. and Mrs. Deering!" The two ladies approached the phaeton, and Miss Wardell went hurriedly on, "There is some mistake, I am sure. Yesterday, while riding, I met Madam Sarita near Beechwood, and stopped to ask about you all. She had just received a telegram from you, Miss Rodney, and was in great anxiety because Mrs. Merton was not yet back, and so many of the servants were away. I saw *my* chance to get my hands on you, and told her I would wire you at once and ask you to come to *me* for a day or two. Sarita said nothing about expecting anyone else, and I told her I would bring you to Beechwood, Miss Rodney, if you turned your back upon my hospitality."

Meanwhile Mrs. Deering had turned to her husband. "What shall we do?" she said anxiously. "You must not wait here. Can't we find *some* way—" she turned her gaze toward the carriage of Mr. Baird, and took a step toward it. "This is Mr. Baird's carriage," she said quickly. "I wish—"

"Pardon me," the man who had been looking so anxiously for Miss La Mar stepped forward, "I heard you called Mr. Deering, sir," bowing respectfully to that gentleman, "and I have seen your picture in Mr. Baird's study. I'm his man, sir, and was looking for a lady who has not come. I'm sure Mr. Baird would wish you to use his carriage, sir."

"I am sure he would, too," cried the fair lady, with a bright look of relief. "Come, dear." And then the voice of Miss Wardell was heard again:

"Now, I *shall* have you, Miss Valentine. Jump in."

When they were driving up Main Street, and were nearing the bank, Mr. Baird's "new man" turned in his place, and said, with a touch of his hat,

"Mr. Baird wished me to stop at the bank in passing, sir. Would you object to my stopping?"

"Not at all, my man," replied Mr. Deering. And so it happened that Mr. Baird, coming out to see his coachman, saw, too, the pale faces of his friends, and hastened to meet them, inwardly much surprised.

"It's of no use arguing," he said, when he had greeted the travellers, and heard of the lost or mis-sent telegram to Beechwood. "You must not go on to Beechwood now, and you half ill, Deering. The house will be closed, the rooms not properly aired—it's simply suicidal. You must go straight to my house and stay there until they have had time to prepare for you. Doctor, am I not right?"

Doctor Ware was a stranger to both, but he saw that these men were friends, in the fullest meaning of the word, and he knew, too, that a closed-up house would not be best for Lysander Deering in his present state. It might not be damp, but it would be dull, perhaps dreary, with its shrouded furniture, its draped pictures, its closed and darkened windows.

"You are certainly right," he said.

But Lysander Deering did not resist. He only said, within himself, "I shall hear the truth, all of it, so much the sooner, and, perhaps, I may see Bruce. Poor Bruce!"

And so it came about that, in spite of the efforts of his friends to the contrary, Mr. Deering was again in Pomfret, weak in body, perhaps, but strong in spirit, and longing to do battle for his only brother's son, the child of his first love, bonnie Kate Montfort.

And so it came about that, in spite of herself, and of the politely worded refusal she had sent across the wires, Val Rodney was the unwilling guest of Ora Wardell.

. . . . . .

"Murtagh," said Mr. Baird, when, late that night, the two stood face to face in the snug little room over the carriage house, "was this arrival known to you when you applied to me for my consent to this business last evening?"

"If you mean the coming of Mr. and Mrs. Deering, it was not. I knew no more of their coming than you did."

"And that telegram? Did you know nothing of *that?* I should like to know the truth, but you are not compelled, you know, to answer."

"I understand, sir, and this *is* the truth. I knew nothing of the telegram, but I believe I know who does."

The banker's look showed his amazement. "I suppose I must not ask a question?" he ventured.

"I will tell you what you wish to know presently, sir. Now—may *I* ask a few questions?"

"You know that you are free to ask what you will so long as it concerns Joe Matchin or Bruce Deering in any way."

"First, then, let me say, don't be surprised at my knowledge; I have lost no opportunities since coming to Pomfret, and I have gained fragments of information from many sources. I am cultivating all the loose-tongued good-for-noughts assiduously, and for a purpose; but much that I have learned is fragmentary: there are missing links—for instance, I have heard that there has been, or is still, some sort of rivalry between Miss Wardell and Miss Rodney. Is this true? and who is the man in the case?"

"There has been such talk, but you know what a country town is. The truth is this: Brook Deering, my friend's absent son, being older than Miss Rodney, was a young man when Miss Val was yet in short frocks. He and Ora Wardell are of nearly the same age, and about the first thing Brook did upon reaching his majority, was to fall in love with Miss Wardell, who had then been out two seasons. For a year or two Brook was her devoted knight, and people said that she was as much in love as he. It may have been; he was, and is, a handsome fellow: not dark, like Bruce, but fair-haired and slender,

with a great fund of spirits ; but yet most perfect and winning manners ; frank, open ways, you know, that made him popular wherever he went. Well, after a time, Miss Valentine Rodney came home for a summer's vocation, and then there seemed to be a divided allegiance. I don't know the inside of the business, if it has an inside : Valentine went back to school, and Ora went away—after a quarrel, it was said ; when she came back, Brook was in the city studying law."

"And have they met since—he and Miss Wardell ?"

"No. She went to Europe, and before she came back the two young men had finished their studies in New York, and Bruce had settled down to law here in Pomfret, while Brook, who wanted to see a little more of the gay world before settling down, went abroad. In the meantime, Valentine has been graduating with honours, and been a one season's belle. Miss Wardell, whose father died while they were abroad, came home some six months ago ; and Bruce, poor boy, was rapidly rising in his profession, when this awful calamity fell upon him."

"He is bearing it well."

"He is bearing it nobly ! Is there any other question ?"

"Yes. Who is this woman Sarita ?"

"Sarita ? She is a Frenchwoman, I think ; she came from Europe with Deering in the capacity of nurse to little Brook, then a child, less than a year old. She has no friends here, is attached to the family, and has always lived here since. Why ?"

"Because—don't ask me *too* much. I believe that she has *destroyed the telegram from Mrs. Deering.*"

"That woman ! Why, man, you must be mistaken ! Sarita is devoted to the Deerings, and they trust her like one of themselves."

"Mr. Baird," said the detective gravely, "I have found, in twenty years' experience as a detective, that in cases like this upon our hands, it is always wise to distrust coincidences ; my attention has been called to two or three such, and I would be a poor detective if I did not follow up every shadow of a clue, regardless of persons. At the same time, it is my practice never to name the object of such scrutiny until I find something *tangible*—something upon which I can take secure hold. Even in my reports to my chief, I do not mention names while matters remain thus nebulous. I will say this much : I have formed, after making certain observations, a theory or two, which I mean to follow up ; and one of two things will be inevitable ; sooner or later the persons I am—studying—will either do something to confirm my theory and turn it into a full-fledged suspicion, or they will in some way show me that I am wasting my time."

"And in that case ?" hazarded the banker.

"In that case, I must begin again. Now when I decided, like yourself, that Bruce Deering was not guilty, I did not, as I daresay you have done, give up all thought of investigating in his direction. My judgment, while I have learned to place considerable confidence in it, is not infallible. In my time I have made some bad blunders, so, while giving Mr. Deering full benefit of the doubt, I shall not drop this thread, but shall follow it until I can prove him innocent or guilty. For, in this case, there are just three possibilities, and I confess I think

one of them most unlikely. First, Joe Matchin *may* have been killed by some tramp or burglar who never heard of Bruce Deering. Second, Deering may have an unknown enemy who has purposely planned to make suspicion point his way. Third, we *may*, all of us, have been deceived in this young man; and he may have had strong reasons for removing his victim."

"Impossible! I do not believe it!"

"Neither do I believe it. It *may* be impossible; but *I* dare not *declare* it *impossible yet*."

The look upon the banker's face was one of actual distress; and, as much to draw the talk away from Bruce Deering as because he thought as he spoke, he said:

"And so you connect Madam Sarita with this affair, Murtagh?"

"I have not said so. Do not jump at conclusions. You have said, remember, that this woman is devoted to the Deerings. If I have read that woman's face aright, there is a mystery in her life, present or past. Now, let me remind you of two facts. I look upon them as facts. Someone, no one can say whom, has sent, in a suspiciously roundabout way, a letter to Mr. Deering—just the very letter which you wished withheld from him for the present; that's one fact. Another is, I *believe*, that the telegram sent by the Deerings to Sarita was received by her and destroyed."

"Do you intend to prove this fact?" smiled the banker.

"At the right time—yes."

CHAPTER XI.

THREADS HERE AND THERE.

MR. BAIRD sat pondering long over the detective's words. "He's a queer fellow," mused the banker, "and knows his business without a doubt. But I don't see how he can be so certain about Sarita."

If Mr. Baird could have followed Ferriss Murtagh from the time when he had called him into his office and given him a commission to Beechwood earlier in the day, he might have been enlightened. But Murtagh had no mind to take his employer into his full confidence yet.

"Someone must go to Beechwood," Mr. Baird had said to him not long after dinner. "I have persuaded Mr. Deering and his wife to stay here until to-morrow, and Miss Rodney will remain with Miss Wardell, but I have promised to send word to Sarita at once, and to find out why there was no carriage in waiting; of course the telegram was not received, for some reason; but they want to be sure. I thought you might like to get a nearer view of Beechwood. It seems to have an interest for you."

"It has," Murtagh had answered promptly; "it's the very bit of luck I want."

Half-an-hour after this, he was lounging near the telegraph office, watching for the chance which came soon. He had not been long upon the depôt platform, in plain view from the windows of the telegraph office, when the boy, who had been favoured with a ride upon

one of "Banker Baird's dandy trotters," saw him, and came strolling out, as if unconscious who was there.

They gravitated together at once, and Murtagh began, with a perfidious smile, and no loss of time :

"Hullo, Bub ! I was sort of looking for you ; thought you might like to help me exercise those fiery horses again. They're pretty stiff to manage alone."

"Shucks !" said the boy derisively ; and then his countenance fell. "Darn it !" he grumbled. "I only wish't I *could!* But I ain't never let go out of sight of these darn'd ole winders, for fear I'll be wanted to lug a clicker to somebody. I have to stay till Jim Bates comes ; that's four o'clock !"

Murtagh expressed his regret in fitting language, and, after some desultory chaffing, said, looking about him, and making a movement as if to go :

"Well, I'm sorry yer tied up so tight, my man; you ought to be a horse jockey like me, instead of being cooped up here. I s'pose you hain't made any more trips out Beechwood way since I took ye there, eh?"

"Well, that's jest where you're left," grinned the boy; "I took another clicker out there last night."

"You don't tell me? Well, that's what I call hard lines ! To have to hoof it back and forth all day like that." He put his hand in friendly sympathy upon the boy's shoulder, and they began to pace along the platform, finally sitting down upon it, with their legs, the long and the short, dangling over its edge. They sat thus for perhaps fifteen minutes, and then Mr. Baird's "new man" declared that he must go at once, and take out "them daisy chestnuts."

His mission was accomplished, and he carried away with him the information which would make his visit to Beechwood more interesting and possibly more important, than he had dared hope to expect.

"That was time well spent," he muttered to himself, as he hastened homeward. How shall I put my new knowledge to best use?" He slackened his pace as he began to ponder, and by the time he had reached the stables he had matured his plans.

It was nearly an hour later when a seedy-looking stranger entered the grounds of Beechwood, and, after some delay, found himself face to face with Madam Sarita, he upon the upper step, she within the small opening she had made at the side door.

He touched his hat respectfully, and then, favouring her with a look which she might interpret as she would, he said :

"I've got a little—word fer you, an' it's of *importance.* I had better speak to ye alone."

The woman eyed him doubtfully, and slowly drew away from the door.

"You may come in," she said shortly.

Once within, and admitted to a small rear room which evidently was that daily occupied by the woman before him, a sort of servant's sitting-room, the man put on a bland and ingenuous look, and drew from his pocket a small book and a stubby lead pencil.

"Lady," he began in a wheedling tone, worthy of a tramp high up

in his profession, "I have to ask ye, first off, to jest sign yer name to this little book."

"What for?" she snapped, drawing back as he presented the book and pencil.

"Fer that little telegram that was brought ye late yesterday afternoon, the *last* one brought ye by my neffy, Will Green."

"I didn't—" she began.

But the man went on without heeding her words. "Ye see, lady, the comp'ny's very particular about these things. It's ag'inst rules to go away without havin' the name on the book, and if my neffy hadn't a come to me an' tole me how 'twas, he'd a been discharged most like afore this, and that would a been very bad fur the boy and fur me."

"What boy are you talking about? I don't know what you mean!" she snapped, her black eyes flashing ominously.

The hand that still held out the book was lowered; the man came a step nearer and fixed his eyes upon her face, and the bland look became less bland, quite unpleasant, in fact, as he said:

"See here, mum. If you are a goin' to say that there wa'nt no boy here, and you didn't git no two telegrams, signin' one, and then declarin', when the other come, that you couldn't sign it cause you'd jest hurt yir wrist; if *that's* what ye was a goin' ter say, *don't ye say it*—because *I* came with the boy, right to *this very gate;* and *I know ye got it!*"

A swift change came over the woman's face.

"If you were with him, as you say," she said suspiciously, "why did not you come in then, and say all this?"

"Well, I'll tell ye, mum." He put his foot upon the round of a chair near him, and rested an elbow upon the uplifted knee. "Ye see, by the time he had got his story owned up—he was kind a backward about it, 'cause he know'd I'd jaw him—by the time he'd told it, we was a'most home, and his time bein' out fer the day he didn't haf to go to the office no more till this mornin', and he didn't haf to take his book till *he* went; 'cause each boy has his own book, ye see."

"Humph!" sniffed the woman for answer. "You'd better go away, old man, or I'll call the coachman to put you out. It's my belief that you're crazy."

"Me crazy!" The man spoke like one aggrieved, and, as he went on, he waxed pathetic, almost tearful. "Now, mum, don't ye think I'm meanin' to blame you for nothin'; I don't mind yer flyin' out at *me* a little; that's nateral enough—fer wimmin folks, lord bless em! But jes' let me tell ye how it *is*, an' then maybe ye'll see things different. Ye see we're poor folks, and there ain't over much work fer Bill and me, in Pomfret, so we want to go west, out where Bill's big brother is. He's wrote us that he can git me a light job, easy enough; and, if Bill 'ud bring him a recommend from the folks he's workin' fer here, he kin git him inter the office out there most like. And then, right now, when we was wantin' to git the recommend, 'cause I've lost my job here, or rather, the job that wus promist me, *this* comes up—"

"Whom have you worked for?" she broke in keenly.

"Wal—I've been doin' kind of odd jobs fer quite a time back, but a

week or two ago, Mr. Baird, he's the banker, ye know, keeps lots of horses, and—"

"Yes, yes I know enough about him."

"Ye dew? Wal, so dew I, *now*, fer he promist to give me a berth in his stables in place of the feller he turned off, and then he turned plum round and took another feller—a sprig a little younger than me, and so I'm out. These rich folks don't care how we labourin' men git on, durn 'em! And *I* don't—"

"Look here," broke in the woman, "I want you to stop this talk and go!"

"Sartin, sartin! I was jest goin' to say that when Bill an' me goes to the office to tell 'em we're goin' west, they'll ask fur his book. An' then we'll haf to tell 'em that the lady wouldn't sign it. And then—poor Bill won't git no recommend." He opened the book, and, suddenly stepping forward, presented it again with the stub of pencil. "Please jest put yer name right thar, mum," he said in a wheedling tone.

She struck the book so suddenly, and sharply, that it flew from his hand.

"I won't hear another word from you!" she flashed; "go this moment!"

He picked up the misused book and put it in his pocket with slow movement, and a melancholy shake of the head, and without an answering word turned and walked to the door as if about to go. With his hand upon the latch he paused,

"I swanny! what a forgetful old fool I'm gittin' ter be!" he exclaimed, turning back. "If I didn't enamost fergit that messige."

The woman started.

"What message?" she asked quickly.

"Why, you see," he began in his former slow drawl, "I was around ter Mr. Baird's, a tryin' ter see, if he wouldn't let me have half a month's pay—or anyway a week's, and—"

"Stop," stamping her foot fiercely. "The *message!*" and she put out her hand.

"'Tain't writ," he said; and then with sudden dryness, "I s'pose they knowed you couldn't sign fer it. Mr. Baird was on the pint of sendin' that new man o' his'n, but I jest licked in and said I'd do his arrend, fer I was comin' up here anyway—I'd a come anyhow jest ter spite that new man, ye see. Wal, I see yer kind o' impatient; maybe I *be* a leetle long-winded; some like a old woman, ain't I? Wal—Mr. Baird, he says, 'Tell Miss *Sar*rity that her master and mistress are here, an' they will be out to Beechwood to-morrer.' He says, 'Tell her they sent her a telegram, and there wa'nt no one to meet 'em—an' they want to know *why it didn't come.*'"

Sarita clinched her hands in a gesture very emphatic and very French, and turned her back upon the tantalising old man for a moment; then she turned again, and her tone was changed when she asked, "Are you going back to Mr. Baird's?"

"No, I ain't." Somehow their respective tones had become reversed. "*I'm* going to that telegraph office. I'm mighty sorry ye won't own to gitten that message, mum. I've got ter stand by my

neffy, and then I s'pose they'll go ter quiryin' round, ter see who's told the truth, an' who *hain't*. Durn the luck! I wisht I'd a got that money out of old Baird; I'd take Bill and start west to-morrow; I ain't never had no luck in Pomfret nohow. I'm right sorry ye won't sign, mum; seems if 'twas easy nuff fer ye *fust time*."

A flash of triumph came into the woman's eyes, as if she saw suddenly a way out of a difficulty.

"Look here," she said, "did that boy tell you that *I* signed that book?"

"Yes—m."

"That he *saw* me sign it?"

The man seemed struck with a disconcerting idea; he hesitated.

"Wal," he drawled at last, "now't I recol*lect*, he didn't jest say't he seen ye, but he sed this 'ere. 'I went ter the door,' ses he, 'an' I gin her the messige *an' this book*.'"

"Ah!" with a long breath of triumph. "You see he gave me the book and I took it in. He was out on the door-stone. He never saw the book *signed*, and *I* didn't sign it." She came a step closer, and actually smiled in his face.

Madam Sarita was a clever woman and not easily deceived, but she could have no reason for doubting the story of the man before her. She had lived long in Pomfret, but she had come little in contact with the townspeople, save as they came in her way at Beechwood.

Of aristocratic Pomfret she knew much, for the best of its aristocracy were often in Lysander Deering's stately drawing-rooms; and she knew, more or less, the servants of these. But she was exclusive, and, in spite of her long sojourn, a foreigner still. In all the years she had passed under the Deering roof she had never formed an intimacy outside that roof. How could she imagine, then, that an imposture could be perpetrated upon her in this bold fashion. She did not doubt the old man, nor his story, and her one thought, as she stood smiling there, was, "Could she rely upon him, if she obtained his promise?"

She had not yet given up the battle; and she meant to use this "*imbecile*," as she mentally named him. There was no other way.

And so, after much seeming reluctance, and an extorted promise, madam yielded, and made her confession, with tears in her eyes—real tears.

And this it was! Madam had not been *alone* when the first message came. One of the maids, who lived not far away, happened to have run in, for she was now at her home taking her vacation; and it was *she*, this maid, who had signed the book then. But, *ma foi*, when the next one came, madam was alone, and *then* it was that she had told that little fib, for although she could write very well, oh, *quite nicely* indeed, in her own native French, in *English* she *could not write even her own name*. That English was *so hard!* And now he had forced her to own this, she would *beg* him *never* to tell the awkward little secret. For people would think her *so* pitifully ignorant, which *really*, in her own tongue, she was *not*."

And then came the finale. If he would promise to take his nephew and go away, *at once*, before there could be any chance for questions, *she* would willingly pay his fare; his and the boy's; she did not care

for the money, so that these people of Pomfret, who knew French no better than she knew English, should not be able to laugh at her.

And this point having been reached, matters were easily settled.

"Well," mused Murtagh, as, moving slowly as befitted his assumed age, he walked away from Beechwood, "I have satisfied myself. I *know* she received and destroyed the telegram; and, knowing that Mr. Deering and his family would arrive to-day, did not lift a finger in preparation for their reception, nor send the carriage to meet them. And I know that she has declared, and will declare, that she never received the message. But that's all I know. Why was this done? And will it be for good or ill?"

He quickened his pace as he found himself cut off from sight of Beechwood by the screening shade of the park. But not too much, for he was still upon Beechwood ground, and he was never recklessly daring, except under necessity; and he continued to muse.

She is too clever a woman not to take measures to find out if the boy has left the telegraph office; but she will not do it openly, and will not be likely to speak of me. The boy shall be got safely out of her way. If she should have reason for thinking we were still in Pomfret, she would be upon her guard, and her little game, whatever it may be, will be so much the harder for me to unearth. I must get Mr. Baird to give Will Green a job on that farm of his. The boy's so crazy over a horse that he will be very willing to go; especially as he finds the telegraph business so hard on his legs."

Murtagh had learned from the boy that he was, in truth, an orphan, and lived with an uncle; and he had used these materials, as we have seen. He was right, too, in surmising that Master Green would be glad of a change of occupation, which should bring him into that congenial haven for most boys, a well-appointed stable.

Mr. Baird was also amenable to reason. He did not precisely require a boy at his country place, but, nevertheless, Will Green found himself, two days later, enjoying a sinecure at Rose Farm as assistant stable-boy. As for the spurious uncle, who had troubled Madam Sarita's peace, he was not seen in Pomfret after that day.

A few days later she proved Murtagh a shrewd guesser, if not a prophet; for she appeared at the telegraph office with some clever pretext, and assured herself, by coolly asking after the "nice boy" who had brought messages to Beechwood, that Will Green, and therefore, of course, his "idiot old uncle," had left Pomfret. After which she breathed freely, and dismissed from her mind what had threatened to be an unpleasant menace.

In the morning of the day following that of their arrival, Mrs. Deering drove to Beechwood in Mr. Baird's carriage, the useful new man being upon the driver's seat.

Sitting thus, Murtagh, a very different personage from the uncle of Billy Green, and feeling secure from recognition, saw Sarita come forth in haste to greet her returning lady; and heard, with interest, her voluble welcome, and her expressions of regret for the untoward accident of the lost telegram.

"I am so *more* than sorry, Mrs. Deering," she declared. "It is wrong to have those careless little boys to run the errands, such

errands! He has already been sent away, I am told, for his careless ways. And do you know," opening wide her dark eyes, "the *bad* boy declared to them that he had *given* to *me* the telegraph message. *Such* a falsehood!"

"Let it pass, Sarita," said her mistress calmly. "And let us go in. I hope you have sent for the servants; I telegraphed for Mrs. Merton from New York, I think she will arrive to-morrow."

It was settled that Mr. Deering should continue the guest of Mr. Baird until the house at Beechwood was open, and the servants in their places; and he was very willing to remain. After a day's rest he came out stronger, and with more energy than they had dared hope to see him display ever again.

The charge, against one of his own blood, of a foul murder, had aroused in him a hot indignation, and awakened a strong purpose to do battle for his brother's son; and the shock, the effect of which they had feared as a deadly blow, had only startled him, as the tocsin call arouses the brave to the defence of his own.

He heard the story of Joe Matchin's murder with sincerest sorrow for the victim; and he would have nothing less than the full and complete account of Bruce Deering's part, active and passive, in the wretched drama. He heard it from Baird, from the clergymen, and from John Redding, then—

"I have had the story from three points of view," he said. "And I think I have grasped it in all its bearings. *Now*—I must see Bruce."

The young man, who, knowing his uncle had arrived, had yet held himself aloof, came at once when summoned, his head proudly erect. But when their eyes met, the mask of pride fell, the haughty look forsook the young man's face, it flushed and paled, and the fine mouth was tremulous as he felt the grasp of his uncle's hand.

"Bruce, my boy," the elder said, still holding his hand, "I am glad to see you come to me with your head erect; a false charge can't take away a man's honour!"

"Uncle," responded Bruce Deering, "it's like death to me, to feel that through me dishonour has come upon your name."

"If *dishonour* had come to me, to my name and yours, boy, it would *be* death to *me*, I verily believe. Dishonour, Bruce, comes through our *deeds*, not through our misfortunes. You have encountered misfortune, cruel misfortune; but your friends know you. You do not stand alone, and this base charge shall be thrown in the teeth of your accusers. Don't doubt that you shall be vindicated. Sit down, Bruce; we may as well talk this over at once."

An hour later, when Bruce arose to go, his uncle caught his hand.

"Bruce, I wish you had stayed at Beechwood," he said, "though I daresay you found it dreary enough."

"No, I cared little for that; though that I missed you all, goes without saying. But I knew you had confidence in Sarita, and Theron, and—I'll tell you just how I happened to come down to the office, uncle. It's really very simple, and I'm sure you would have done the same in my place," He uttered a short laugh. "It's all because of Mrs. Merton's deafness. You see, I was sitting in the

morning-room some ten days after you left, and it was so late, and I had lingered so long, that I daresay they thought I had gone. But while I still sat at table, I heard Sarita's voice in the next room, Mrs. Merton's sitting-room ; she was talking of Mrs. Merton's visit—the old lady was going next day—and telling her how much the two maids and Saunders longed for a holiday ; and while she expressed her own perfect willingness to remain, she *did* sympathise with the others who had homes and friends they would be glad to see."

"Yes, yes ! And then *you* must announce forthwith that it would be more convenient for you to live down town ; and you bade them all go and enjoy themselves," smiled his uncle. "Didn't you now ?"

"Something like it, Uncle Lys. You gave me full plenipotentiary powers, you know ; and then, it *did* seem like unnecessary pomp for one lone bachelor to live there with butler, cook, and two housemaids, to say nothing of—"

"Yes, yes ! I know. *I* don't blame you, only—I wish you hadn't !"

"Surely you don't blame poor Sarita for saying what she never meant me to hear ?"

"Bless you, no ! Sarita is as fond of you as she is of Brook ; she'd only be too glad to immolate herself for you lads ; she always has been your vassal. This is what I wanted to get at ; I want you now to come back home."

"Uncle Lys—please don't ask that of me ! I couldn't now. Wait until this stigma is taken from me,—if it ever is. I can bear up alone ; but to live, day after day, powerless to fight for or vindicate my honour, under the pitying eyes of those two women, I cannot."

The elder man urged his point with loving insistence, but he gave it up at last.

"I'm disappointed, Bruce," he said. "But I won't pretend that I don't understand your feelings ; I *do*, and I honour them ! If it will not add to your comfort to be with us at Beechwood, I will say no more. You will come to us sometimes ?"

"If you wish it, *all* of you."

"We do wish it !—all of us," said the other, and again their hands met in a strong clasp.

As the days went on Mr. Baird found himself becoming more and more a walking encyclopædia for his "new man." And, though some of the inquiries addressed to him seemed, to him, to be "beyond the question," he answered all cheerfully, and no longer questioned his interrogator, who, as he saw full confidence established between them, explained himself less and less.

A few days after the Deerings had left the Bairds' mansion, and Beechwood was once more open to its friends, Murtagh sought the banker in his sanctum.

"Mr. Baird," he began, for he no longer wasted time upon preliminaries, "I learn, about town, that Bruce Deering has always lived at Beechwood until lately."

"That is true."

"Do you know why he does not go back ?"

Mr. Baird looked at him fixedly for a moment.

"Would *you* go back to such a house, in his place ?" he asked.

"I hope not," was the prompt answer; "nevertheless, I am asking for information."

"And you shall have it." And as Mr. Deering had told the story of his interview with Bruce, and its result, to him, he now retold it to the detective.

"Julius Cæsar!" Murtagh broke out at the end, "that woman crops up altogether too often!"

"What woman?"

"Madam Sarita, of course; who else? Don't you see it? She lets Mr. Bruce hear her tell how much the servants need a holiday. Now, suppose that, for some reason which we do not yet understand, this woman wants the house to herself, don't you see how well she has managed it. The housekeeper was going away, so, knowing well what to expect from young Deering once he knows, or thinks he knows, the situation, she waits her opportunity, and when he is within hearing, confides her sympathy for the overworked domestics to Mrs. Merton, *who is deaf*, when she *knows* she will be overheard."

The banker's face wore a look of amazement.

"Murtagh, all this is an enigma to me. I shall not try to follow you."

"Thank you. I hope you won't—not yet. But *I* mean to follow *her*. And to that end, Mr. Baird, I wish you would give me every possible opportunity to visit Beechwood. I want to know the servants, some of them—better."

"'In the house of my friend'?" quoted Mr. Baird, reproachfully.

"For your friend's friend's sake," replied the detective.

"What must be shall be," smiled the other. "You are relentless, I see, Murtagh. I am in your hands."

"And they will not let you fall or fail, if work and will can conquer."

As if by one accord, the two men grasped each other's hands.

As he was about to go, the detective stopped, when almost at the door, and turned back.

"There is a very little matter—(that is, little in itself; I can't say how important it might become if I could only understand it)—that I don't see a way to getting hold of."

"Ah! and what can it be?"

"Simply this: from the little I heard at the station when your friends came—"

"And Miss La Mar *did* not!"

"And Miss La Mar did *not*. I understood that Miss Rodney had been asked to stop with Miss Wardell."

"True."

"And that she had declined the invitation. Wait," as Mr. Baird seemed about to speak; "I heard Mr. and Mrs. Deering speak of this, and the lady expressed some wonder that the two telegrams, which, she said, had been sent at the same time, should have had such curious results. I remember her words. 'We,' she said, 'wired Sarita that we were coming with Valentine, and ordered our carriage at the station, while *Val* wired, declining the invitation from Miss Wardell. We found no carriage in waiting; natural result of a telegram lost;

while Val, her telegram being received, still finds Miss Wardell at the station.'"

"Well," said Mr. Baird, as the detective paused, "what is the little question?"

"I'd like to know how Miss Wardell explained her presence at the station, having received her negative message."

"Really," said the banker, smiling again, "that *is* a delicate point to investigate. Obviously, the persons who can best give the information are, first, Miss Wardell,"—Murtagh shrugged his shoulders—"and, last, Miss Rodney."

"Better."

"But—who could ask Miss Rodney such a question? And how could such a question be explained? Positively, Murtagh, I know of only one person who could do a thing like that, and do it successfully."

"Who is that—person?"

"That person is Brook Deering, and he is in Europe."

"And why is he especially qualified?"

"Well, if you could see the lad, you would not need to ask the question. Brook Deering is one of those happily-constituted fellows who can take all sorts of liberties and still be popular. There's a sort of sunny *bon homme* about the fellow that disarms criticisms. Jove! I wish Brook Deering was at home, if only to cheer up Bruce and stand his friend."

Murtagh was silent a moment, then—

"Got his picture?" he asked.

"Yes, I've got his picture; wait a moment, I'll show it you."

He left the room, returning in a moment with a half-length photograph of the size and shape known as panels.

"There he is," he said, "and a good-looking fellow, too."

It was the picture of a young man, slender and graceful, with his handsome head thrown back and slightly turned aside. The features were almost too perfect, the eyes fine, the full-curved lips smiling beneath the short moustache; the hair, falling in short waves over his forehead, showed light even in the picture.

"Blonde?" That was all Murtagh said as he gave back the picture.

"Blonde; yes—a handsome fellow. You may search the country, and you won't find two such handsome fellows as these cousins, Brook and Bruce Deering."

"To judge from that picture you must be right," said Murtagh; and, Mr. Baird having laid the picture down, he took it up again and scrutinised it more intently than at first. "I rather admire dark men myself. Now, your Bruce Deering is, to look at, a man without a flaw—physical perfection; and—yes—one might say the same of this chap, only, somehow, he has not such a look of strength, of power—I would not call *this* one an athlete." He put the picture down, and suddenly changed the subject. "If I should come up missing at any time, Mr. Baird, and such a thing might happen—if I can catch on to a clue to follow, or, that I *can* follow—if this happens, and I should be in haste, or unable to communicate with you for any reason, when you miss me,

go to my room and look under the carpet, which you will find loose just under the table that stands between the two windows; you'll probably find news of me there—if not, look in the mail. Good-night."

CHAPTER XII.

ORA AND VALENTINE.

THERE had been no intimacy between Valentine Rodney and Ora Wardell at any time during their acquaintance. The two girls had been educated at different schools, and when Miss Wardell made her appearance in society two years in advance of Valentine, the latter was still a school-girl. Then had come Valentine's emancipation and home-coming, and this was followed soon by Ora Wardell's second European journey, accompanied by a chaperon in the person of an aunt from Boston, with the learned and loftily tolerant Boston manners, and altogether *au fait*.

Gossip had named them rivals, but Valentine had passed her first year of social freedom as gaily as the gayest bird, though with none of the bird's spring longings for a mate, and had enjoyed each month of the twelve as only a healthy and heart-free maiden can, when she has beauty, friends, and fortune, and is seventeen.

During the first six months of the twelve, Val Rodney and Ora Wardell were often thrown together as belles of the same little circle must be. And if Ora, the stately, had felt a single jealous pang or any bitterness of spirit towards the bright *débutante*—who certainly had monopolised many of the moments which, before her coming, handsome Brook Deering had devoted to her regal self—she made no sign, and if, in those days, she had never sought Val's society, neither had she shunned it, meeting and greeting her always with well-bred courtesy, with smiles and light exchange of social greetings, always adding, when Valentine's charms were lauded in her presence, her own ready word of praise, gracefully given; and certain it was that, if Miss Wardell had retired from the field as one foreseeing defeat and unwilling to face it—and this is what the gossips said she had done—she made a graceful retreat: paying a farewell call at Beechwood, and making her adieus in a frank, friendly, cordial manner, which should have disarmed criticism, had the critics been there to see. At Beechwood there had been no criticisms.

It was not so surprising, then, that Ora Wardell, having learned by accident that Valentine was returning to a home not yet ready to receive her with due ceremony, should at once offer the hospitalities of Wardell Place.

Still, it was a surprise to Val—she could hardly have told why, and she had declined the invitation, not because of that supposed antagonism, but because she preferred, for reasons of her own, solitude and her own thoughts, just at that time.

To Brenda she had explained her refusal in these words:

"I don't want society, Brenda, dear. Pomfret will have but one

topic now,—poor Matchin's murder and Bruce's trouble. I don't want to talk about these things, nor to hear them talked about."

But when the failure of the Deering carriage fairly forced her into acceptance of Miss Wardell's invitation, she had yielded with pleasant grace, and found her visit less difficult and more agreeable than she had imagined possible.

Of course the dreaded topic must be touched upon, and Ora Wardell opened the subject promptly. But she did not linger over it. She told her little story of what she termed "that long to be remembered night," spoke feelingly of the hapless victim, uttered a few indignant words in condemnation of the accusers of Bruce Deering, declared her belief in him and her faith in his ultimate triumph over misfortune; and then she drew away from the subject, not abruptly, but with evident intention. It would seem that she had no more desire to discuss the affairs of Bruce Deering, at least with Valentine, than had Valentine.

This little which was said was gotten over at luncheon, soon after the arrival; and the remainder of the day had been passed in quiet. Valentine, who was really fatigued, gladly accepting the suggestion of her hostess that she rest a part of the afternoon at least.

"You look weary," Ora had said kindly; "I can imagine how you have all been aroused out of your usual quiet and content by the late happenings; and then this hurried journey. Don't think that I want to weary you with *my* society. You know I always occupy myself; I have learned that it is the only way, if I am to live in comfort and content in this big house, with only Mrs. Ferries and the servants.

"Thank you," Valentine responded, "I *am* tired; I will take you at your word." And then, as she observed a book in Ora's hand, "You read as much as ever?"

"More if anything. But this is a music book—church music. Since they put in that fine new organ at St. Mark's, I have taken much pleasure in playing for them. I think, if you really care to sleep, I will go to the church and practise for an hour."

When Valentine had gone to her repose, Ora stood for some moments with the book in her hand, and her brow wrinkled with the intensity of her thoughts, just when she had wished her guest "sweet rest and a cheerful awakening," outside the door of her room. Then she went down the hall and entered her own "den," where she took from a desk some paper, which she slipped between the leaves of her book, and a fountain pen which she put in her pocket."

"I hate it! I *hate it* horribly!" she muttered to herself as she left her room.

Ten minutes later the grand organ of St. Mark's was wailing out low, prolonged notes—notes that sounded like a dirge.

That evening, after dinner, the two young women sat in the library and carried on a languid conversation. After a while the talk turned upon foreign lands, and then, naturally, to foreign travel. This led Miss Wardell to relate two or three amusing little experiences of her own.

"I was in Rome then," she said at the conclusion of one of these, "and—oh! by the way, I met Brook Deering in Rome. Did he tell you of our meeting?"

Valentine smiled faintly.

"Brook and I have not corresponded," she said; "we have exchanged a few notes at long intervals, but it has been a long time since he has favoured me with even a note. He writes to uncle very regularly, and occasionally to Brenda. And you saw him in Rome?"

"Yes." Ora drooped her eyelids and rocked slowly to and fro. "We met several times. He called, in fact, and we went upon two or three excursions together." She put out her slim, white hand and took up a fan. "Brook was not looking well, I thought."

Valentine looked up quickly. "Oh, I am sorry to hear that," she said. "I have sometimes thought that Brook ought to know more about his father's state of health. That he ought to come home, in fact.

"Why!" Ora lifted her eyelids wide open now in surprise. "I supposed you were expecting him! He talked of coming home when *I* saw him last, in Rome, months ago! He talked of surprising you. But I did not suppose he really meant *that*, although—" she paused as if embarrassed, and Valentine laughed and finished her sentence.

"Although it would be quite like Brook, to pop in upon Beechwood unawares, you think? I'm sure I agree with you."

. . . . . .

As early as eight o'clock of the next morning Mr. Baird's "new man" was waiting at the gate with his hand upon Lady Jane's bridle, when Val Rodney came tripping swiftly toward him from the direction of Wardell Place, which was less than half-a-dozen blocks away.

Seeing Lady Jane, she halted before the new man, and asked: "Is Mr. Baird going out?" and then stopped, seeing Mr. Baird himself emerge from the shrubbery on the other side of the gate and come toward her.

"Why, Miss Val," he said cordially, "you are an early visitor!"

"I am not a visitor, Mr. Baird. I have come to ask if you can tolerate another tramp, at least until after luncheon. Miss Wardell is called away, by the 10.20 train to Churchill, to see a friend who is ill. And so I am come back to you."

"Oh, then you have not quarrelled with Miss Wardell?" he said jestingly.

"No, indeed! Nor am I likely to do so; don't hope it. I am not half so dangerous as I used to be, I assure you. And Miss Wardell urged me very hard to remain at Wardell Place, but of course I couldn't do *that*. How is uncle?"

"Come in and see for yourself." He drew her hand through his arm, and turned back toward the house, saying over his shoulder, "Tie her, Ross. I'll not be long."

CHAPTER XIII.

A MUDDLE.

TWENTY minutes later Mr. Baird came briskly through the gate again and paused beside Lady Jane.

The sleek animal stood pawing the ground and nervously tossing her head. The reins, which he had seen last in the hands of his "new man," had been slipped under the spring at the side of the dash-board, and Murtagh was nowhere visible.

He had meant to send the horse back for the present, so that he might see a little more of his latest guest, who was a very welcome guest indeed. But as he was about to call Jerry, and put him in charge of the uneasy animal until Murtagh should choose to resume his post, he was accosted from the rear. Turning, he met Mr. Arden, his hand upon the gate.

"Arden!" he exclaimed, as they greeted each other with cordial hand-clasp, "I'm glad it's you! You're one of the very few men in Pomfret this morning whom our friend Deering will be really glad to see."

"Tell me about him," said the clergyman anxiously. "Is he able to talk freely? Is it safe—or allowed?"

"Allowed, yes. Up to a certain point. But you shall see. The young doctor is still with him, and Liscom has already been here."

"And gone?"

"And gone. Come in, man!"

"Yes, in one moment. Tell me, has he been told—everything?"

"Concerning Matchin's death—yes. And Bruce—they have met, you know. He *would* have it so. He has heard it all—all the facts. But there's one thing which we all tacitly ignore, and shall continue so to do—so long as it remains so baseless, so lacking a respectable voucher, even for its shadow."

"And that is—?"

"That is the miserable tale, which no one can trace home, about the quarrel with Matchin, and—about that girl."

"Eh—that! You have done well! Well indeed."

"Yes. So it seemed to me. And yet—" They had reached the broad piazza and were about to ascend the steps leading to the vestibule, when the banker turned, paused, and laid a hand upon his companion's arm. "*How* that story is being blown about! Arden, there's something uncanny in it! Why, it's been taken up everywhere, and has become so interwoven with the simple facts, and the circumstantial possibilities, that it's making out a case which, from the outside point of view, sounds horribly plausible."

"I know it," said the clergyman. "And how long do you fancy it can be kept from the ears of Mr. Deering, once he is out of your house?"

"Oh, it must come, of course! I wish I could understand it! It looks as if poor Bruce had an enemy somewhere."

"And so he has. I am sure of that. Oh—"

Someone had stepped out from one of the big French windows lower down, and now came rapidly toward them from behind the screening vines that grew all about the piazza. It was Val Rodney, and she spoke hurriedly while she put out her hand in greeting.

"How do you do, Mr. Arden. Uncle Lys has seen you through the library window, and you must not let him think you are *preparing* anything you may have to say. He is very sensitive—I have seen that in ten minutes—about reservations." She looked wistfully from one to the other. "You understand—you will pardon me?"

"For being wiser than we—and more thoughtful?" queried the pastor gently, drawing her hand through his arm as they all three moved with some haste through the vestibule, and so into the presence of Lysander Deering, who was standing erect in the middle of the library, a look of strained expectancy upon his face. As it became apparent that there was nothing new concerning the one topic of interest to all, and that this visit of the good clergyman meant nothing more than friendly concern for himself, this strained look passed away, but his gaze was still earnest and anxious, and he at once plunged into the one all-absorbing topic.

In their anxiety for his welfare, these leal and true friends had sought to keep from him this tale of trouble, with its menace of dishonour; but now that an unseen hand had thrust this thing upon him, for what sinister reason they could not guess; and seeing that he bore himself so gallantly, they willingly rehearsed each feature of the tragedy as they had seen it, and made all as clear to his mental vision as was possible.

When Mr. Baird had shut up the bloody hatchet found in the vault, and Murtagh had carried away the fragment of linen with its compromising initials, they had agreed that these two discoveries should not be made known—at least not yet. And so both hatchet and bit of linen had been spirited away, where no searching hand might chance upon them, to await developments.

"The moment we admit a third party to our confidence," Murtagh had said, "we make it impossible in case of trial to withhold these important witnesses. If it is to be young Deering's trial, heaven knows there are witnesses enough. If we should ever be forced to believe him guilty, or, if we find the other man, we can then produce our 'witnesses'; but we must know where and how they will fit first."

And to all of this Mr. Baird had agreed.

"What *I* would give much to know," ventured Valentine, who had been a silent listener while they were filling up for her guardian, as best they could, the gaps he had found here and there in their by no means complete narrative, "and it seems to me quite important, too, is this: who is the enemy, the snake in the grass, who sent Uncle Lys that letter? It was never a *friend*, although it was so signed."

"No," agreed Mr. Deering, "it was never a friend."

Mr. Arden looked from one to another. He had not seen his friend Baird for two days, except for a passing word upon the street, and the fact of the anonymous letter had been kept between the two families and Murtagh: "I do not understand," he said, and suddenly checked himself.

"No—of course not." Mr. Deering drew from a breast-pocket a yellow envelope, and extended it to the minister. "We have thought it best not to make it public property," he said, "but it was an anonymous letter that informed me of—of matters in Pomfret. Baird, here, had simply let me know that Matchin was dead. It was *this* that brought me home."

The letter was written in a cramped and uneven hand, evidently disguised, and it ran thus:

"MR. DEERING,—I believe you are bein' deceived for some reason: You will know best when I tell you that Joe Matchin was murdered, and that *they say* it was your nefew that done it. Knowin' him likely to be arrested most any day, and without friends to see him through, I write to let you know the truth. *Thar's strong proofs against your nefew*, and you ort to be informed. If you ain't already, I ain't got anything against him nor you, so I write this.

"A FRIEND."

As Mr. Arden looked up from the perusal of this missive, a housemaid appeared at the door.

"Mr. Tom Wells, sir," she began, with a little half curtsey. "He says he will not disturb you but a minute, sir."

The banker started up, glanced at the others, and sat down again.

"Bring him in, Alice," he said; then glancing again at his two friends, "Wells can hardly have a secret that we may not all hear. Eh, Wells?" for the new-comer was already in the doorway, and had heard his last words.

"No, sir," replied Wells, quite unabashed, as he bowed comprehensively to all, and then brought his glance back to his host. "What I came to say, sir, is not much; maybe it's hardly worth troubling you about at all: but you told me to report if I caught on to anything—"

"Yes, yes," broke in the banker, "and *have* you found anything, Wells?"

"Well, that's as may be," drawled Wells, with a quizzical half smile. "Maybe I've come with an old story. You see I ain't been let very fur into the ring." He glanced from face to face once more. "I'm takin' it for granted that your fine detective that ye sent for has come, and been here among us right along. And, maybe, he's had an eye upon Jonas Wiggins?"

Valentine Rodney had left the room with the maid, when Wells had entered it, and, of the three men who listened to these words, Mr. Arden seemed most startled—most impressed.

"Wiggins!" he exclaimed, "ah, I thought so." Then he checked himself, and it was Mr. Deering who took up the word.

"Wiggins? It's a new name to me, Wells. What does it mean?"

But Wells still glanced from the others back to the face of Mr. Baird; evidently he would take his orders from him.

"We have heard nothing of Jonas Wiggins, either through our detective, or in any other way, Wells," said Mr. Baird. "Tell us your story."

"It's no great of a story," began Wells, apparently satisfied that he was now properly launched. "Maybe you remember, Mr. Arden, how Wiggins hung about that night—the night we found poor Matchin, I mean; and that he wasn't none too willin' to leave when Mr. Baird

give the word to clear the place of all but such as he had picked to stay. *I* noticed it *then*, and I see that he was sulkin'." He turned toward Mr. Deering who had moved uneasily in his big chair, "I'm tellin' this because I want to explain how I come to take such a sort of interest in the feller and his doin's, since—"

"Go on, Wells," broke in Mr. Baird, "tell it in your own way. We are all interested."

"By all means!" corroborated Mr. Deering; and Wells resumed:

"I've seen a good deal of Jonas Wiggins, off and on for a good while; we've been neighbours, in fact, though we ain't now; and I never had much of an opinion of the skunk, beg yer pardon, sirs; but I should have forgot all about him this time—for I was pretty busy beatin' the bushes with the boys, tryin' to git a trace of the man that we're still wantin' to find—if I hadn't heard some remarks in the crowd, the mornin' of the inquest, that set me to watchin' Wiggins a little. Now, gentlemen, you're wantin' me to come to the point—and here it is. Jone Wiggins is up to some sort of mischief; either he knows somethin' that he hasn't told, somethin' that he means to use when the time comes, or else he is playin' a big game of bluff. One thing is certain, he is no friend to Mr. Bruce Deering."

Lysander Deering started and turned toward his partner. His face wore a flush, and his eyes were burning.

"Baird," he began briskly, "perhaps Wells has found out one of those enemies of whom we were speaking only a short time ago! This Wiggins—can it be the man who was found in my grape arbour a couple of years ago, and who gave Brenda such a fright?"

"Oh!" cried Baird, "I had forgotten that circumstance! It's the same man."

Mr. Deering turned back to Wells.

"What do you know of this man?" he asked, "and how long have you known him?"

"About three years." Wells seemed to be weighing his answers. "He has not been in Pomfret longer than that. He's a loafer by perfesion; only works now and then, and not long at a time. Big talker, and a deal of swagger. Drinks more or less every day, and has an occasional spree, when it's all more and no less. And that's one reason why I think there may be something behind all this big talk. When he's sober he talks large about Matchin's case; and he don't hesitate to say that he *thinks* Mr. Bruce Deering's the man. But he's careful not to show no spite, and talks big about justice and fair play and all that. But, in his cups, he sings another tune; and now and then he drops a word that sets me to thinkin' he *may* know something that ought to be got out of him before—" He paused, and glanced askance at Lysander Deering.

"Go on," said the latter sharply. "Before the case comes to trial, you mean?"

"That's it, sir; and I just made up my mind I'd not let Wiggins have too long a string. I thought your detective ought to try and get some sort of a grip on the feller."

Mr. Arden had been a silent but very attentive listener, and now he leaned forward and fixed a keen gaze upon Wells.

"What do you mean by that, Wells?" he asked. "Can you give the detective a clue?"

"Umph!" replied the interrogated, "I might give him a *hint*."

Banker Baird got suddenly upon his feet.

"Since we have gone thus far, Wells," he said, "I may as well tell you that 'my detective,' as you call him, *is* here, and quite near at hand; furthermore, he has expressed a wish to see *you* personally, and soon. I believe he thought you might help him if you would. I am by no means in his full confidence. I know no more of his plans than the merest outline; but he means to make himself known to you, so—wait here while I go and tell him you are at hand."

When their host had closed the door behind him, the three men left in the library were silent for some moments, each seemingly occupied with his own thoughts. Then, suddenly, Mr. Arden, that usually bland and serene personage, arose and began to pace to and fro in front of the long windows, silent still.

A moment later, Lysander Deering lifted his head from the hand upon which it had been resting, and drew his chair nearer to Tom Wells.

"Wells," he began, "if you think you have a hold, a clue, upon this man Wiggins, I wish you could tell us what it is. No man can have a stronger interest in this hideous business than I. No one will do more to help solve the mystery which hangs about it."

"I only said the truth, sir, when I said I might give a hint. At one time they lived pretty close to us, Wiggins and his wife. You know the place, the old mill property, and the cottage just behind it. Wiggins lived six months in that cottage, and they used to quarrel like brute beasts. Sometimes she would let fly a speech that we would catch a'most word for word. Her voice was one of the carryin' kind. If her flings an' taunts meant anything, the feller has seen the inside of jail at some time, an' he hasn't always sailed under the name of Wiggins."

Mr. Arden had stopped his promenade, and now he made a quick stride and placed himself before the two men.

"Wells," he broke in, "you are a shrewd man. And since this person has been brought before us for discussion, and we can all trust each other, *I've* a story to tell."

"What's that?" The door had opened silently behind the clergyman's broad back, and Mr. Baird stood before them, a crumpled paper in his hand.

"We are not done with surprises, it seems," he said, holding up the bit of paper. "I found this in the room which our detective has occupied for a week or more, and in which I expected to find him. Listen:—

"'DEAR SIR,—Am suddenly called away by first train. If am not back in three days will communicate.—M.'

"Short and sweet, you see. And evidently written in haste. Half-an-hour ago he had no thought of leaving town, I know. Something has occurred within that time."

In the momentary silence following upon this reading, Mr. Deering,

who sat directly before his partner, leaned toward him and held out his hand, which gesture Mr. Baird interpreted by placing in it the half-sheet of paper.

"I did not mean—" began Deering, and then stopped short, and they saw that he was reading something scrawled across the lower end, at the back of the note. There were four or five written lines, and as he read the last words they saw a shade of surprise and anxiety cross his face; then quickly he was upon his feet, thrusting the paper into the hands of Mr. Arden who stood nearest him.

"Read it," he said, sharply.

The clergyman glanced inquiringly at Mr. Baird.

"Read it," nodded the latter.

"*Some* one," read Mr. Arden, "ought to keep near Mr. Bruce D—— for the next *twenty-four hours—he* must not *understand*—but there must *be no chance* for *an interview* between him and *that man Wiggins.* Explain when I see you."

The clergyman let the hand holding the paper drop at his side.

"This seems strange," he ventured.

"Strange!" echoed Mr. Deering.

"Very strange!" came from the banker; but Tom Wells spoke to the purpose, turning toward the "Parson."

"Wasn't you a-going to say something or nuther about Jonas Wiggins a minute ago here?" he questioned.

"Yes," assented Mr. Arden, "and I'll say it now, at once." He moved back as he spoke, and looked at Mr. Deering. "Won't you sit again, sir?" he suggested.

"Yes, yes!" said the old man, hastily seating himself. "Sit down, sit down all! Now, parson, out with it," nervously watching Wells return to his former seat. "This plot seems thickening rapidly out of nothing."

"The man Wiggins seems to come out strong at least. Now, here's my contribution to the general muddle. I suppose, brother Baird, you have, in telling Bruce's story, mentioned my sudden exit from the young man's room on the night—"

"Of the discovery?" broke in Mr. Deering. "Yes, he did—he did!"

"We're all human, brother Arden," smiled Mr. Baird. "If you had not requested me afterward, not to question you about your sudden bolt, I might have thought it of less importance."

"Of its possible importance I am not prepared to speak," returned Mr. Arden; "but this is what I was about to relate: as we approached young Deering's rooms, you," nodding toward Mr. Baird, "were in advance with our host. The two young men—"

"What young men?" broke in Mr. Deering, almost querulously.

"Mr. Morse and John Redding."

"Surely—surely—my memory *is* slippery. Go on, sir."

"In following I had fallen a little, perhaps eight or ten feet, behind the others, and anyone seeing us might easily have supposed I was not of the party. As Deering and the others passed into the shadows of the outer entrance, I fancied that I saw something—a shadow—behind the tall tree not far from the door. I had hastened my steps

seeing you so much in advance of me, and was by no means certain that I had not fancied the movement; but as I entered behind the others, I was almost *sure* that I heard a low, quickly-drawn breath, as of one who breathes hard after haste or exertion, and strives to suppress all sound of it. At the time it seemed scarcely worth speaking of. It might be some person wishing to avoid strangers. At any rate, if there were a presence near, I did not for a moment connect it with our party *then*."

"*Then!* Ah!" Mr. Deering could scarcely control his impatience. "After that?"

"After!" Mr. Arden again looked toward Mr. Baird. "You may recall that my seat, I being the last to enter, or by other chance, was quite near the door?"

The banker nodded.

"And while Mr. Redding was speaking, I distinctly heard a faint sound in the hall without; it was a step; I was near enough to hear a step without, even if it were a light one. And, a few moments later, I changed my position, moving my chair yet nearer the door. I was sure that nothing said in the room could be heard outside, for all spoke in guarded tones; and when I had changed my position nothing within could be seen through the keyhole; but all at once I became conscious of a strong desire to open that door and to spring out. I felt that I must know who it was that, as I was now certain, had dogged us up the stairs, and was now playing the eavesdropper. It could scarcely be a friend, and, suddenly, the thought, 'if not a friend, then an enemy,' determined me to see that enemy's face. Just then came a sound which convinced me that the listener was about to go away, and I rushed after him. The spy was in full retreat, and almost down the stairs; but he tripped, or stumbled, and in a trice I had him so tight that I almost choked him, and so disqualified him for a witness to his own misdeeds. It was Jonas Wiggins, and he was very nearly drunk." He paused a moment, and again came the sharp questioning voice:

"What did you get out of him?"

"Very little, but the fellow convinced me that he was playing a part, intoxicated as he surely was. At first he attempted to explain or *seemed* trying to, and I led him to the tree where I had first seen his shadow, stood him up with his back against it, and asked him why he was prying there. He began with a maudlin whine, he 'was doing no harm, meant it all for good, wanted to see Mr. Bruce Deering, wanted to *tell* something—*had* something; meant to be a *friend*, wanted to tell—' And here the fellow suddenly broke off, and was evidently making an effort to pull himself together. From that moment, drunk though he undoubtedly was, the fellow was playing a part, and grew more tipsy every moment. I have had some experience of drunken men, and Wiggins, I became assured, was not too drunk to be crafty; he had let himself utter a word too much, and he began a long, wandering, senseless tale, to drive from my mind, I suppose, all thought of his first utterances. I saw that it was useless to try to draw from him that which he was now bent upon concealing, so I marched him a goodly distance from young Deering's door, gave

him some good, and more or less threatening, advice, and left him to go home, as he could very well do, I knew—"

"And you got no hint of his meaning?" queried the elder Deering.

"No hint at that time. A few days after, he approached me with great pretence of shamefacedness, and made a very amusing effort to draw from me such idea as I might have formed of his visit to Deering's quarters, and his purpose. He assured me that he didn't remember in the least why he went there; and only had a faint remembrance of so going, through my last admonishing words, which, he declared, clung to him and fairly sobered him. When we parted, after that second and last interview, I was more than ever convinced that he went to Deering's rooms *for a purpose*, and that not a friendly one; beyond this I cannot go."

When he had ceased speaking there was a long silence in the library, and four grave faces interchanged anxious, inquiring glances.

Then Mr. Arden spoke again.

"I may as well add," concluded he, "that, at the time, I was both puzzled and uneasy. I could not forget the man, his appearance, his strange, maundering words, and his drunken efforts to take them back when too late. I believed the man meant mischief, and, from the first, hoped that I might see my way to something more definite, something which would enable me to guess, at least—and to tell this story, which, naked and alone, amounted, after all, to nothing more than my own half-formed interpretation of a drunken man's meaning."

"Wal," put in Wells, rising and giving himself a shake, "you've found something to encourage ye to tell it out, parson. Three times an' out, they say. First my yarn—then the detective chap's leettle word of warnin', n'now comes your leettle adventer." He turned sharply to Mr. Baird, "Kin ye make any use of me jest now?" he asked.

"One moment," interposed Lysander Deering. "Let us first consider my nephew. I mean to go to him at once, and, Baird, I rely upon yourself and Mr. Arden here, to help me keep the boy *in sight;* as for this fellow Wiggins, if he is kept away from Bruce until your detective returns, what matters the rest?"

Mr. Baird seemed to ponder; then he rejoined, "I think you may be right; and was considering whether Murtagh might not be hindered, rather than helped, if, in our zeal, we followed up Wiggins so closely as to let him see that we were dogging him. What do you think, Wells?"

"Wal," assented Wells, "I think ye may be most likely right; so long's you keep Mr. Bruce Deering out of his way, I sh'd say 'twould be quite enough ter keep an eye on Wiggins, so's to know where he spends his time, and be able to report it, without makin' any attemp' to interfere with him in any way. That is, if you'll keep Deering out of his way, I'll keep track of his goin's an' doin's, and guarantee 't he won't never suspect me of runnin' on his beat. What d'ye ye say? *I'll* haf ter be goin'."

They were soon agreed, and quickly separated, each man having his part to play.

"I really think," said Mr. Baird when they were about to separate,

"that Murtagh will feel quite satisfied with our little bit of amateur work." And he set out at once to do his share, in arranging for Mr. Detective Murtagh—when he should return and be made acquainted with their forty-eight hours' campaign—what that astute officer would not, and *did* not, hesitate to pronounce a "*confounded*—unmitigated—*muddle!*"

CHAPTER XIV.

BRENDA MEETS A FOE.

ALL that Tom Wells had said of Jonas Wiggins was true and much more. The man had been an inhabitant of Pomfret for nearly three years, idle for the most part, intoxicated often, and, at such times, surly, rather than social, and quite apt to stagger homeward at a certain stage of his intoxication,—that stage at which men are apt to become loquacious, and more confiding than, in their moments of "sober second thought," they like to think of.

Aside from the occasional doing of "odd jobs" about town, Wiggins seemed to have no occupation, or source of livelihood, save and except that of hunting. And there had even been times when there had arisen something akin to rivalry between himself and Tom Wells, who was, in truth, a mighty hunter, and who owned a modest farm, which, being "let for cash," furnished its owner ample, if simple, support, while he gave all his active moments to gun and rod, and other outdoor occupations, which took him far afield, and made him wondrous well acquainted with Pomfret's surroundings.

Wiggins, on the other hand, made his appearance as a Nimrod, as well as in the character of labouring man, interchangeably, and semi-occasionally; being, in the interim, rather quiet than otherwise, seldom boisterous, even when mingling with those who were notably so; and, at no time, even at his worst, an actual disturber of the peace.

Very few questioned what he did with his idle moments, and fewer still could have given satisfactory information. Indeed, among his fellows—those who, like himself, drank a little, more, or much, as the case might be, and idled more or less—there had sprung up, because of their similar tastes and pursuits, a sort of brotherhood. And Wiggins, because of a crude knowledge of the world, which he seemed to possess, and a certain sly shrewdness, and rough sharpness of tongue, which, among them, passed for wit, had become something of a leader among these roughs and ne'er-do-wells of Pomfret. And he was set down by them as "no slouch of a talker;" "a bad un ter beat with a gun;" and "sorter shiftless round home." This last proposition founded upon the oft-repeated statements of certain neighbours that *Mrs.* Jonas was often seen "a-choppin' her wood," and Jonas himself, "*never.*"

The Wiggins family, consisting of but the two members, lived in a small cottage, scarcely more than a hut, in the very outskirts of the town, and on this particular day, at the very moment when the four

men in Banker Baird's library were discussing the dubious, not to say suspicious, doings of the head thereof,—head but by courtesy in this case,—the pair were at home, and unusually occupied.

As a rule, when Jane began to berate Jonas, because of some wrong, real or fancied, that lord of creation demonstrated his ability to rule his own household, by rising, when he could do so; and, with a step which became more haughty as it grew less steady, strode from the room, which, in reality, constituted the house; kicking at anything which chanced in his victorious path.

To-day, however, Wiggins sat astride his most reliable chair, stationed squarely in the middle of the room; and the valiant Jane knew, by a certain dogged upward and outward reach of his ugly chin, that, this time, there was a battle to fight, to win, or to lose.

"I tell ye," she was declaiming with an angry sparkle in her eye, "you're jest makin' a fool of yerself 'n' *I* know it. First place, ye ain't *sober 'n' you know it!*"

"Uh! Ain't I?" he sneered. "Now, how—"

"*'Cause ye ain't.* Nor ye hain't hardly drawed a *real* truly sober breath since, lemme see, not since that night—"

The man sprang up, and caught her by the shoulder.

"Drop that!" he cried with an oath. "Drop it, or—" he let a clenched fist, close under her nose, complete the sentence.

"Pooh!" She tossed her head and flung herself away from him. "Sometimes ye ken be the meachinest, Jone Wiggins! Jest as if 'twas goin' to hurt ye to speak about that night, jest 'tween you and me! But *that* ain't the question. I tell you 'tain't the right time ter go to young Deering; an' it's best to go to the woman, anyhow. She's the one to shell out liberally; and *I* know jest how to git at the hull matter. Jest let *me* alone, ter manage a woman like *that!*"

Wiggins went unsteadily back to his seat.

"There ain't no use of argyment," he snarled; "thing's *mine*—ain't it?—didn't I find it, say?"

"Oh, yes!" she jeered. "You found it, an' you daresent keep it about ye half-an-hour, and so came runnin' home to me—good job, too, drunk as you was 'fore mornin'!"

"All the same," he persisted, doggedly, "it's *mine*. *I* found it." The leer with which he finished this declaration seemed to rouse the woman to fury.

"Maybe ye *found it*, an' maybe ye come by it *some other way*," she insinuated, coming close before him with hands upon hips, "but *I've got it*, and I'm goin' to *keep* it, to make a sensible use of."

The man half raised himself from the chair, and lounged heavily back again, letting his chin fall upon his crossed arms, which rested upon the chair-back.

This worthy couple had been engaged in an altercation which began soon after the man's return from his favourite "saloon," at an unusually early hour. And, if the woman had not been working her way by degrees into a frenzy of rage, she would have been quicker to note this sudden and unusual relapse at this particular stage into quiescence, which soon became, or seemed to become, an absolute stupor.

Being blind to all save her own wrath, she made one or two ineffect-

ual efforts to goad him to the "retort uncourteous," and, failing utterly, turned her aroused energies in another direction.

Breakfast had been scant, and Jonas had set out for town promising to bring back the wherewithal for a more satisfactory dinner, but he had returned early, and empty-handed ; and now, when she tried to extract from him an answer to her demand for the promised dinner, his only reply was a grunt, and shaking off her none too gentle hand, he stumbled across the room, and literally dropped himself upon a shabby bed in a dark corner, where he was soon breathing heavily.

It was not until this state of affairs had been reached that the woman's face relaxed some of its fierceness ; then, as she stole softly to the bedside, and bent over the sleeper, there was a grim smile upon her face, which was broad and short, with wide mouth, quite devoid of any expression of humour. In more youthful days she must have possessed a coarse sort of beauty, made up of bright fresh colour, fine white teeth, still handsome, and abundant hair, coarse, but glossy, and genuinely black, as were the eyes, which, in these later days, were expressive, but not tender.

She bent above the recumbent man, and stood thus motionless for a moment, then she placed a hand upon his shoulder with a light pressure.

"Jone!" she sibilated, and, after a moment, and somewhat louder, "*Jonas!*" then, still louder, "*Jonas Wiggins!*"

Jonas stirred slightly, muttered something unintelligible, and finally threw out one arm and turned half over, his face toward the wall.

"Blind drunk!" she muttered contemptuously, and then, for a few moments, there was silence in the room, while the woman watched as at first. At last, as though quite satisfied, she began to move about noiselessly, as if preparing to go out, and finally she came back, and, after another hasty examination of the recumbent figure, began carefully but quickly to rifle the pocket which had been considerately brought uppermost when the slumberer had turned his face to the wall. The work was accomplished soon and safely, and Mrs. Jonas Wiggins was presently upon the highway, taking long strides townward, covertly counting the scant stock of coins, which she still carried in one hand, and muttering as she went :

"Brute of a man! Leave nothing to eat, and bring nothing but his drunken self. I'll have a square meal now, and a good one. And I'll have my share of it ate up all comfortable long afore he wakes up, or I miss my guess."

Alas for Jane!

By the time she had reached the place in the "snake fence," where the gate was not, Jonas had opened his eyes and lifted his head from the scanty pillow. At the moment when she was counting her, or his money, he was deep in the mystery of feminine hiding-places, and muttering, as he moved about, so quickly, and so dexterously, as to make the sham of his seemingly drunken sleep evident, had there been one present to see.

"Drat the woman!" he muttered as he plunged his hand into a deep pocket, "she's hid it agin! So! the darlin's been suspectin' of me, is it!" But as his search grew longer he grew less facetious, and

went on overhauling nooks and corners in angry haste; finally stopping to survey the wreck, for he had made Jane's orderly room look the habitation of a destructive lunatic.

"I believe the hussy has beaten me!" he cried with an oath and a stamp of his foot; and then his eyes lighting upon the clock shelf, he sprang toward it.

It was a small shelf, and high upon the wall; and the clock was Jane's exclusive property. Being taller than her spouse, she could reach it easily, and wound it with great regularity. On the other hand, Jonas could scarce touch its face when standing upon his tiptoes.

Now he seized an overturned chair and, in a moment, had jerked open the clock door. Several small treasures lay inside the case, below the swinging pendulum, but the first thing to attract him was a tiny box, a druggist's pill box; nothing more. With a trembling hand he pulled off the cover, which fitted too tightly for his impatient fingers, but a glance at the bright pink cotton within, and a touch assuring him that there was something, solid, if small, concealed beneath the soft fuzz, and he was down from the chair. Two minutes later he was out of the house and away, taking a roundabout route to town, by which means he was safe not to meet the defrauded Jane; but stopping at a sheltered and otherwise convenient point for taking a long and refreshing drink from the bottle which, all the time, had been concealed in the pocket that, by turning over so innocently, he had effectually protected from Jane's prying fingers.

"Now," he accosted himself, as he put away the almost empty flask, "Mr. Wiggins, *your* time's come! Jane's keen! nobody disputes *that;* but I've heard her air *her* ideas so many times, that they're jest as good now as *mine;* I *know* 'em, pat! Jane 'll rage—but, if I make my stake now, it needn't worry one. No—but it'll worry Bruce Deering, or some of his friends, you bet!" and he patted the pocket, an inner pocket, and well concealed, where lay the little cotton-filled pill box; and then, probably to subdue his fast rising elation, he emptied his flask, and in this way came into town, and seemed to gravitate to the door of his favourite grog shop.

He was not yet intoxicated, but he felt very comfortable, and every inch a man. He was not inclined toward conversation, and he did not accept, after having his flask refilled, of all of the half-dozen "treats" offered him by a group of his chosen friends.

"Sorry, boys, but can't stop now," he explained; "feller waitin' fer me; goin' fer a little gunnin'; jes' come in ter fill up, see?" tapping the flask affectionately.

He left the place with swagger and jest, and took himself into the better part of town by a roundabout way, sauntering past the bank, and loitering awhile in the shade of the great trees which skirted on two sides the walls of St. Mark's.

From here he took his way slowly, and his face lost some of its easy assurance. As the sun rose higher, the air grew warmer and was full of early summer sounds; and, as he reached the inviting shade of the trees of Beechwood Park, his feet began to drag, and he threw himself down by the wayside. And now he was no longer the Jonas Wiggins of the last two hours. He looked ill at ease and uncertain.

"I'm blest if I don't feel queer!" the man muttered half aloud. "Can't see a way clear to begin after all!" He stood up and looked about him with ill-feigned carelessness.

He had stopped at the point in the road where the plain board fence, inclosing some vacant lots, joined the more ornate palings of the Beechwood domain, and these palings standing out some three feet beyond the lower boundary, formed a cosy nook, where some overhanging boughs, from both park and meadow, made a perfect screen for the loiterer, shielding him from view until the traveller upon the highway came directly opposite.

In this comfortable and inviting corner our slow-going pilgrim established himself to ponder the situation, and, having thus pondered for some moments with no satisfactory stirring of the grey matter beneath his limp hat and tousled hair, he roused himself so far as to draw forth the newly-filled flask, and seeming to find in it some cheer, if no enlightenment, he let it rest beside him in the long grass, close to his guarding hand.

"It's a fact!" he again soliloquised, "I'm stumped! I wish't now I'd gone into society a little more! If she wa'n't a woman, an' a real 'ristocrat! Old John Tucker! but I've *got* ter git some sort of style onto myself from somewhere." And his hand coming into contact with the flask, he grinned. "Come on, old boy, you've loosened my tongue before, jest enough an' not too much. That's the ticket—there—that goes! I begin to feel first-rate." He looked up at the sun. "Gittin' on, time is." And he threw himself at full length upon the soft sward.

This was true enough; at this precise time Lysander Deering and "Parson" Arden were making a prolonged call upon Bruce Deering, a little to the surprise of that graved-faced but composed young man; and, Tom Wells, upon a hot scent, was just making an exit from Wiggins' favourite "*saloon*," with a disabled gun over his shoulder.

Before Wells had again struck his trail, Wiggins, his fair game almost in sight, was fast asleep, and snoring in the shady corner at the foot of Beechwood.

. . . . . .

Mrs. Deering had been at Beechwood since early morning, and there were signs of her presence everywhere in the big, handsome house, that was home indeed to its proud master—master of all, save the two lovely women who made it the place of comfort and beauty he had ever found it, since first sweet Brenda Deering crossed its threshold, mistress, indeed, of his heart, his home, and his happiness.

Without, where Robbins, the old gardener, reigned, all was in its spring-time glory, and this, perhaps, is the reason why Brenda comes out upon the balcony overlooking her blooming rose garden, and stands gazing there with a weary look in her eyes, and a sorrowful droop of her tender, womanly mouth. The balcony, opening as it does from her own favourite sitting-room, looks down upon the garden, and is visible from the entrance, and even the highway beyond.

A full hour had passed since Jonas Wiggins fell asleep by the roadside, and as the lady of the manor turned to go in, after a long survey of her fair garden, she encountered Sarita in the doorway.

She, too, wore a look of fatigue, a sort of strained and anxious look, which at once caught the attention of her kind chatelaine.

"Sarita," she said quickly, "you have done enough to-day. Go and rest; all is going well, and Mrs. Merton must come to-morrow, I am sure."

"It is not that, madam! Ah, always you are so kind! There is a man below—waiting—at the steps. He asks to see *you*. Oh! *such* a man!"

"Well—?"

"I told him to go away, madam; he is not a tramp, nor a beggar, I think, and then he said I must tell you. It was from Mr. Bruce—a letter—"

"Give it to me!" Mrs. Deering drew herself erect, her face changed, and suddenly seemed aroused and strong. "Where is it?" she demanded.

"Oh, Peste! He would not give it to *me!* He must see none but *you*. Madam!" she came suddenly closer, "send that man away! He is not fit! He is not safe! He is a *bad* man, and—I *think*—*drunk!*"

"I shall see the man at once!" Her sweet voice was haughty now; but the next moment she turned back and smiled. "I shall not run unnecessary risks, Sarita. Tell Robbins I want him to sit, until this person goes, in the dining-room, and—where is Samson?"

"In his house, I think, madam."

"Good! I shall go down after you, by the dining-room stair. Tell Robbins to bring the dog to me in the dining-room, and do *you* stay there, after you have taken the man to the little reception room. See that the outer room is unoccupied, and that no one comes nearer than the dining-room, unless I ring."

Whatever may have been her thoughts, fears, or anticipations, they were not to be read upon the calm countenance of Brenda Deering as she swept into the little reception room, and confronted her unusual visitor.

Even a more astute person than Jonas Wiggins, with all his wits at his command, could have seen, in that fair face, no shade of surprise, annoyance, apprehension, or any other emotion or feeling, save, perhaps, a mere shadow of surprise, as, advancing straight toward the uncouth figure standing uncertainly in the middle of the room, she said,

"You wished to see me, I am told?" As she paused directly before him, the right hand, holding tightly between its slender fingers a dainty handkerchief, dropped carelessly downward, and she swerved a little aside, thereby exposing to view the door by which she had entered, open as she had left it, and, standing upon its threshold, a great dog of the St. Bernard species, huge of his kind, and as grave and stately as his lady mistress.

Wiggins had awakened from his nap partially sober, and had entered the room with some well-defined ideas of his part in the coming interview, and how he should play it; but the grace and composure of the lady, or the dignity and strength of the big St. Bernard, or both together, had evidently disconcerted him. He stood silent before her,

and looked uneasily, not to say sheepishly, from one to the other, and for a long moment they confronted each other thus. Then the lady spoke again.

"I am Mrs. Deering," she said. "Will you tell me your errand?" There was a touch of haughtiness in the tone. She had not meant it, but her feeling of repulsion was instinctive. The man perceived it, and was himself again.

"I sha'n't detain you long, ma'am; at least I don't want to. It'll be fer you to say." He paused and glanced toward the door.

"Well?" she was standing straight and still before him, her fierce eyes fixed upon his face. He felt again that sensation of uneasiness, and turned his own gaze away, moving restlessly as he resumed:

"What I've got ter say concerns yerself, 'tennyrate yer family, an' it's private, or it'd *better* be—" turning to look warily about him. "Ma'am, d'ye object to my jest shettin' that door?" He pointed toward the door by which she had entered, and where the dog still stood.

He had not expected her quick compliance; but this had been a part of his programme, intended to make its impression, and to convince her of the importance of his errand. To his surprise, she turned calmly.

"As you like," she said, and lifted her hand. "Samson!"

The great dog raised his head and made a dignified entrance, pausing just within the door.

"Shut the door, Samson."

The dog turned, lifted one great paw and pushed the wide door to its place.

"Sit down, Samson."

The dog seated himself upon his haunches, and his eyes went back to the face of his mistress. After his first glance at Wiggins, the intelligent animal had kept a steady eye upon her, and now, as she crossed the room, his eyes followed her every movement, while she pushed a chair slightly forward, seated herself with deliberate grace and once more turned her face toward her visitor.

"Now," she said, "you can tell me what your business is; you are quite safe from intrusion."

"An'—listeners?" he persisted.

"And from listeners. Now I must beg you to proceed; my time is of value. What is your errand?"

The man came a step nearer.

"I take it," he began, "that ye're interested more or less in Bruce Deering, eh?"

There was a sudden start, and a quick recovery, a flash of the eye and a haughty uplifting of the head.

"Young Mr. Deering is my husband's nephew," she answered coldly. "Do I understand that *he* has sent *you* to me?"

"Him! Bruce Deering? Oh! no—no, ma'am. Not at all. I've come on my own account—and *your'n*."

"Then make your errand known at once. I shall give you but a few moments." The voice was icy now. Wiggins felt its frigidity, and it stirred him to wrath, that, and the lately imbibed contents of the

pocket flask. Again he forgot his prearranged programme, and the diplomatic approach he had meant to make.

"Oh!" he cried, forgetting caution, "you won't be so haughty in a minute, maybe! Maybe I *am* the dirt under your feet, ma'am, but you'll be glad enough to listen to me soon!" And he began to fumble hastily in the pockets of his dingy waistcoat.

Instantly and silently Brenda Deering was upon her feet. There was a gesture, an almost imperceptible lifting of the hand, and the big dog had bounded to her side; then the hand fell, and as the animal crouched at her feet, she said, with a note of sternness in her voice, "Waste no more words, sir. Your errand, whatever it is; and at once."

The man came a step nearer; there was an ugly sparkle in his eye, and he seemed to ignore for the moment the presence of the dog. He was holding something tightly clutched in his hand, and the mock humility of his speech was belied by the leer upon his face.

"I beg ye many a pardon, ma'am; I ain't troublin' ye all on my *own* account. No, indeed; it's because I thought you a friend to Mr. Bruce Deerin' that I've come here—" he paused and seemed to hesitate.

"Go on!" she said, sharply. "Did Mr. Deering send you to me?" She was pale now but quite firm and self-controlled.

Wiggins made a moment's pretence at hesitation, then—

"I wish't I knew jest how much I ort to say to ye! I—I'm a friend to Mr. Bruce, an'—the fact is—" the fellow looked about him uneasily, his bravo was forsaking him. This erect, clear-eyed woman disconcerted him in spite of his native impudence. "Well!" he exclaimed, after a moment, during which the eyes of the fair woman never left his face, and those of the dog seemed to increase in size and to glow ominously, "Well, ma'am, if you'll jest let me explain in my own way, it'll be the easiest way, an' ye'll understand how I happen to—to a come to ye like this."

She was silent a moment, then turned and resumed her seat. "Go on," she said, "and speak to the point."

"I will. I surely will! Right ter the pint, ma'am. Ye see, on the night of Joe Matchin's murder, ma'am, I was goin' home quite late; goin' by ther way of Main Street, and I sat me down on the rail of the little bridge acrost the creek clost to the end nearest to the bank. It was purty dark, and I don't *think* he noticed me when he come hurryin' by—" He paused, evidently expecting a question, but she only said—

"Go on!"

"I don't know to this day what made me do it, but after settin' there fer some minutes longer, I got up and went back the way I had come. It had come into my mind, a settin' there, that the steps of the feller that passed me so fast in the dark *had stopped short.* It was a still night, and they sounded real plain at first."

"Yes, yes!" she said, as he paused again.

"Well, ma'am, I went back sort of slow, and I hadn't got half way to the bank when I heard steps runnin' again, and I stopped to hark a minute. Afore I could start myself again, the bell began to ring." Once more he stopped and looked at her, sharply, cunningly.

She was very pale now, and her lips were firmly set; both were silent a moment, then she spoke, still coldly calm :

"I think you had better finish."

"I will! I'll come to the pint. Two men come hurryin' up behind me and I follered 'em ; they run straight fer the church, but the bell had stopped, 'most as quick as it begun, and someone was comin' out of the church and down the steps. I fell back then, and I saw the others meet: the man—him that had rung the bell, I mean, ye know—and the two that had run past me in the dark. They spoke low an' excited like, and all three of 'em went *right into the bank.* I knew somethin' was up then, an' I stayed outside an' kept quiet till some others came—in jest a minit it 'peared to me. Then I went closter, until I got to the steps; I didn't go inside just at first, but walked the length of the steps ; 'tain't allers wise to be the very first in sech a place ; but when some others started to go in, *I* started too."

Again a pause; and again the command came promptly:

"Go on !"

"I was right by the north-east corner of the steps when I lifted my foot to go up, and I knew, as I set it down, that I was a steppin' *on somethin'.*"

"Oh!" the exclamation was involuntary, and she closed her lips firmly after it.

"Nobody noticed *me,* an' I stooped over an' felt for the thing my foot had touched, an' shut it tight in my fist." He came suddenly near enough, upon the side farthest from the dog, to allow her to see the object he had been holding in his closed palm.

"This is it," he said.

It was a little thing and very simple; but one glance was enough to transfix Brenda Deering, and to leave her sitting before her tormentor as pallid and terror-stricken as if he had held out for her view something hideous, ghostly, horrible beyond words to depict.

It was only a sleeve button, such as might have been worn by gentleman or lady, cut, it would seem, from a block of palest amethyst, into an exact square; and upon the upturned face of this square, etched in gold, and dotted with tiniest seed pearls, were two initials ; she did not need to bend forward to see what they were; she knew at the first glance, and with a deadly horror clutching at her heart, that these initials were "B. D."

CHAPTER XV.

HELD IN CHECK.

FOR a long moment, Brenda sat like a frozen image of horror, then the man drew back and coolly replaced the dainty bauble in his dingy waistcoat pocket.

To her dying day, let it come never so late, Brenda Deering will not forget those awful first moments. But she was made of a fibre as strong as it was fine ; born of brave blood, and schooled to self-control.

The man seemed gloating over his momentary triumph, and in no haste to break the spell of horror he had woven about this fair proud woman. It was Brenda, at last, who broke the silence. She was pallid still, and still inwardly horror-stricken, but, after that first moment of absolute panic, her thoughts had travelled fast. Lifting her eyes to his face, she questioned him with absolute haughtiness.

"Do you mean to tell me," she began, "that Bruce Deering *sent* you here—*to me?*"

He was not prepared for this question, and she saw his hesitation.

"You had better not say yes," she said coldly. "For it will not be the truth!"

Still Wiggins hesitated.

"My servant," she went on, "spoke of a letter. Did you bring me a letter?"

The scoundrel pulled himself together.

"I reckon he fancied *this 'ere*," tapping his pocket, "was *letter* enough."

"That!" with a curl of the lip. "What has *that* to do with Bruce Deering?"

The man stared in astonishment.

"Do *you* mean to *say*"—he began vehemently—"do you *mean ter say* that that 'ere button *didn't* belong ter Bruce Deerin'?"

"Certainly I do not; but why should you fancy it was *his?* And why do you bring it here to *me?*"

"Because," he took the button from his pocket again, and held it up before her eyes, "see! There's his initials. Do ye really mean that it *never was his?*"

"*I* never saw him wear such a thing. But—" she hesitated a moment, "if it *is* his, he would, of course, have its mate. It looks more like a woman's ornament."

"Oh! It does?" mockingly. "Then maybe it belongs to *you.* B. D.—that stands fer *your* name too, I reckon."

"You villain!" she was on her feet again. "Do not dare to address such words to me! Why do you come here—to me—with that thing? which you may, or may not, have picked up at the door of the bank! Why have you pushed yourself into my presence, through the use of a friend's name? If you can trace any connection between that bauble and myself, do it, and clear yourself of a charge of imposture, of a charge of blackmail, or its attempt!"

Wiggins gazed at her with amazement, not unmixed with admiration, for a spirit and courage which even he could recognise. How often since this bit of carved and jewelled stone came into his hands had he rehearsed this interview, as he had been so certain it must be. At first he had meant to take the button to Bruce Deering, and to say, "See, I found this so and so; it is the last and strongest link in a long chain of circumstantial evidence; *what is it worth to you?*" And then—it was the old story—the woman had persuaded him.

"Now, Jone Wiggins," she had said to him in her most emphatic idiom, "don't be a bigger donkey than ye kin help. Say ye go to this young feller jest as ye've pictured. Ye'll have ter go alone, of course. Well, he's big and strong, and ye say he's killed one man, an'

that he's got a temper like a reglar catamount. Wal, when you've made yer little speech, what's to hender him from jest naterally tearin' you to pieces, an' sarve ye right too fer bein' sich a fool, an' a takin' the thing away from ye, an' kickin' what's left of ye into the street. Tell me that? 'Sides, how much money has *he* got anyhow? Now you listen to *my* plan." And he did listen.

They must go to the woman with their bit of convincing proof.

"At any rate, *she* can't lick ye, nor kill ye, nor rob ye; an' that ain't all! Them 'nitials are *her'n* as well as *his'n*. Can't ye see the point? She's got money of her own; and d'ye 'spose she's goin' to let that proud husban' of her's get a chance to suspicion *her* anyhow? You jest leave it ter me, Jone Wiggins, an' we'll be better off by a good many hundred dollars, as easy as nothin'. *I'll* go up ter Beechwood, and ye'll see how I'll bring my fine lady ter book!" And then she had rehearsed the arguments she would use to bring about this desired result.

Well, he had listened to Jane, and then had tried to improve upon her plan; and here he stood face to face with a defying lioness, menaced by a huge and dangerous animal; and all his daring, defiant, and convincing arguments had flown, together with the first exhilarating effects of his frequent draughts from the now empty flask. Besides, she had in the very beginning entangled him, caused him to trip and to contradict himself, almost to convict himself of falsehood.

He had meant to approach her as a messenger from Bruce Deering, and then Jane's suggestive, "Them 'nitials are *her'n* as well as *his'n*," had filled his mind with other and richer possibilities. Why not assume to believe the button to be *hers?* Hesitating between the two plans, deciding with difficulty, and aided by the flask, he had slept, at last, upon his decision; had awakened refreshed, and set off upon his enterprise, with the words that were to startle, daunt, and overwhelm the lady of Beechwood fairly quivering upon his lips.

And now!—the words had escaped somehow, and he stood there, uneasy, almost sheepish in his momentary stupidity, and utterly at a loss.

All this had flashed through his mind as she spoke, and during the long moment of silence, in which she stood, her head thrown back, looking at him with scorn in her level eyes.

"If you have finished your errand," she said, as he stood awkward and angry, and mentally floundering for the right word or a way to begin again, "I will ring for someone to see you safely out; my dog does not seem friendly to you."

As she spoke, the dog, hitherto quiet, gave a low growl, and, at the sound, Jonas found his tongue. It had suddenly occurred to him that, after all, his wife's plan might be best. At least, it had the merit of simplicity and plain speaking, and must soon bring about a climax—of some sort.

"I've got a few words more to say, ma'am," he began glumly; "I'm a poor man, an' I've got a fambly ter take care of, an' when I found this 'ere button it occurred ter me that it *might* be worth somethin' ter *you;* of course, I don't say it *was* dropped by the m— the person that killed Joe Matchin; but, bein' found right there, it might been kind of embarrassin', if it was brought inter court. Don't ye think so?"

"Go on," she commanded, ignoring his question.

"Of course ye *might* easily have dropped the thing some time when ye was callin' ter the bank; that's nacheral enough. But, don't ye see, that if it *was* to turn out to be yourn or Bruce Deerin's, it would make a lot of talk; an' if I was ter let on how I found it, an' *when*, an' *whar*, it would jest clinch *his* case—unless it was proved to be *your'n*."

"And then?"

"If it was *your'n?* Wal, then, it would make it worse fer ye both." He stopped short, the thought that suddenly sprang up in his evil brain was none of his, nor could it have been, scoundrel though he was; such a thought could only have sprung from the mind of a woman lost to her womanhood, and steeped in evil, as the sot is steeped in wine. "If it's your'n—there's them that might say that ye was claimin' it *to screen Bruce Deerin'*, fer there's plenty to think it's pretty nacheral fer a hansum young woman, that's got an old husband, ter try an' save a good-looking young man, an' keep him right in the fambly. *I* ain't sayin' this is *so*, ye know; only, it *might look* that way, don't ye see?"

What was it that sent the haughty blood, which had flown to Brenda Deering's face when she arose and defied him, back to her heart again? Why did she stand there silent and let this man speak on? He had paused for a moment, but began again, with more confidence and a rising sense of elation.

"Ye can see fer yerself how it would look; an' then *there's the old man*—" He paused again, and again took the button from his pocket. "I'm a poor man, ma'am," he resumed with a fair imitation of the street mendicant's whine; "an' my wife an' me are gettin' on in years. This 'ere that I've found is of some valley, an' anyone that returns it ort to have some sort of reward. Le's put it *that* way; my wife an' me's tired of Pomfret. We want ter git out of it. Couldn't ye jest name a sum that'd take us away, say ter Calaforny or Texas, an' help us ter live thar kind a half-way easy, an'—this 'ere button's yours. An' Mr. Bruce Deerin' won't have it ter buck against when he comes ter be tried, nor *your* name won't be rung in no way ter raise trubble in the fambly."

During this speech Brenda Deering's whole manner had changed. She still held herself erect and outwardly calm, but the haughtiness was gone; she was pallid still, and seemed hardly to listen to his last few sentences; her eyes were turned away, and she seemed pondering some new and important question.

When Jonas ceased speaking, she continued to stand with compressed lips and eyes fixed upon vacancy, until, having "said his say," and being ill at ease, he began to shuffle his feet and cough ostentatiously behind his hand, upon which the big dog lifted his head and growled again. At this Brenda roused herself, and one who knew her well might have detected a sudden alertness in her face, voice, and manner.

"Do I understand you then, that you wish to *sell* me this jewel?" she asked.

Wiggins looked at her keenly from under his bent and lowering brows; he had been quick to perceive her first terror, and he was not

slow to note the new change, but he did not understand it. He could not read a woman like this. She puzzled and she awed him—him! Jonas Wiggins! who had never known what it was to fear or to respect a woman! He wondered what she was about to say, and he no longer felt sure of the result of his mission.

"To *return* it," he amended, after a moment's reflection; "'twould sound best so, ma'am, and you jest to reward me."

Her lip curled as she asked:

"And what sum would you call a sufficient reward?"

"I shouldn't like ter set no price to a generous lady that's rich enough ter make a poor man comfortable fer life an' not feel it," he modestly hazarded.

She came a step nearer.

"Listen to me," she said, and her cold clear tone, with neither fear nor hesitation in it, was not encouraging; "I have just this to say to you, and when I have said it, there will be no further parley. That jewel, which you claim to have found, is not mine, nor have I any desire to possess it. Whether it belongs to Bruce Deering or not, I am unable to say; but—if it does, or ever did, belong to him, *you* never found it as you say. Bruce Deering comes of a race of honest high-souled men. And none of the name of Deering ever yet forgot his honour, or dipped his hand in blood. He is innocent of the murder of that old man, and needs no aid from you, or from me, to prove his innocence! I will not pay you one dollar to purchase that trifle upon his account. Wait!" as her visitor seemed about to speak. "There is one thing you have not thought of: I have a husband who, at this time, is in a critical state of health, and who must be kept, as much as possible, from shock and annoyance. To know that you, or anyone, might bring forward, and publicly question the ownership of such a bauble as that, bearing, as it does, the two initials of my name, would annoy him exceedingly. For *this* reason, and *for no other*, I make you this proposition. But, first, tell me the truth; does anyone know that you have this button? *anyone*, mind!"

"I ain't sech a fool as that," declared the man bluntly. "Time enough to *tell* about it when you've *druv* me to do it."

"By refusing to deal with you?"

"Jes' so, ma'am."

"Very good; now listen. You are to go away now, and, in the meantime, keep this matter to yourself as before. And to-morrow—at this same hour, we will say—you will come back for my answer, and—your reward. I must have time to consider, and—to go to town. Ladies do not usually keep large sums of money by them. Do you agree to this?"

The scoundrel hesitated.

"If I don't—what then?" he hazarded.

"If you do not, I shall ring that bell and have you escorted to town, and delivered over as a blackmailer; and I shall claim that bauble as the recognised property of a friend who is far away from Pomfret; and who will accept the word of a man like *you*, as against *mine?*"

"Ye will!" he fairly hissed, his face darkening with rage and dis-

appointment. "An' *that's* how fine ladies does business on the square, is it!"

"Spare your words," she replied icily. "I am dealing with you in the fashion you can best understand. Decide, and at once. Do you choose my terms, or arrest and the tender mercies of the police? And remember. This must be kept behind closed lips. Otherwise—you *understand.*" She turned and moved a step toward the door. "I can spare you no more time," she said. "Shall I ring?—or—"

"Wait!" he interposed. "If I wait—if I come to-morrer, what then?"

"You will have my answer—then."

"And you pay me for the button?"

"If I *take* it, I pay you—liberally."

"An'—if yer don't?"

"If I do not—you are at liberty to dispose of it in any way you please."

He caught up the battered hat, which, since his entrance, had rested upon the floor.

"'Tain't what I expected from a lady like you," he muttered; "but I'll wait; I'll come to-morrer at, say—"

"At four o'clock precisely," she cut in. "Come, Samson."

The great dog sprang to her side; she rang the bell, and, without a further glance toward him, awaited the prompt servant.

"See this person outside the gates," she commanded; "Samson seems a trifle cross."

Five minutes later Jonas Wiggins is moving slowly townward, neither richer, nor wiser, than when he came; and not half so well satisfied with his own diplomacy as he had been an hour earlier in the day.

CHAPTER XVI.

"WARNED."

BRENDA DEERING stood at the doorway of the little reception room until she saw her uncouth visitor pass from her sight down the steps of the outer vestibule, and then she went, still with firm step and proudly lifted head, down the wide hall to the dining-room, where Sarita at the open door greeted her volubly.

"Ah, madam! But this was too much! You, so weary already, to have to listen so long to some beggar's tale. Your heart is too good, indeed it is! And madam is paler than before!"

"Nonsense, Sarita," replied her mistress. "I have only heard the man's story, and sent him away with a promise to consider his case. He did smell of brandy, however—or beer. I am going to town, Sarita, and I may bring Mr. Deering home. Possibly his nephew also. Order the carriage for me. I shall dress at once." And she swept on and up the stately wide-curving staircase.

"Lay out my grey dress, Judith," she said to the maid who sat sewing in a little curtained corner of her dressing-room, "and then go

down and unpack the case with my linen in it. See if things are ready for the laundry, and, if so, put them in the baskets. Then you may help Sarita, if she needs you." She was still calm, and still pale, and so she remained until the girl had passed out and she had turned the keys in both the dressing-room doors. Then she threw herself down upon a low couch, uttered a smothered groan, and fell to trembling violently, ending with a wild burst of tears, in the midst of which she sprang up and began to move about the room hastily.

"This is no time for crying," she muttered between lips that were struggling for firmness; "I must not give up yet! Oh, how thankful I am for the strength which held out against that awful, that terrible man! And now I must be still stronger, firmer yet! and in the face of—*what!* Oh, if I could *know!* If I could KNOW!"

Then, much as she had stood, in the presence of Jonas Wiggins, she stood again beside her dainty dressing-table, staring into vacancy, and striving to master the mental and physical tumult into which his visit had thrown her; and soon, outwardly calm once more, but with a look in the beautiful eyes that was almost one of terror, she crossed the room and sat down before a dainty writing-table.

"It's the only way," she murmured, "and there is not a moment to lose."

Taking up a pen, she selected, after a moment of search, a plain sheet of note-paper with an envelope to match, and began to write as follows:—

"BRUCE,—No matter what your reluctance or your scruples may be, you *must* give me an opportunity to see you *immediately*. I have that to say which concerns both *you* and *myself*. *It is vital.* I shall follow this note in half-an-hour. Do you be ready to drive with me to Beechwood, where you must dine. You must judge the urgency of this request by the name of her who makes it.

"BRENDA D——"

. . . . . .

Bruce Deering was sitting in his hired apartments conversing in a listless fashion, which he was vainly trying to make more interested and interesting, while Mr. Arden and John Redding each manfully sustained a large part in a prolonged chat, which must needs avoid the very topics of paramount interest to each and constantly present in the minds of all.

Since the moment when the four men in Banker Baird's library had read the hastily written warning of Detective Murtagh, three long hours had elapsed, and Bruce Deering had not been alone, save for the first fifteen minutes, during which the four men had planned their visiting campaign, and Mr. Baird had planned for the comfort, such as it might be, of his invalid partner and guest, and had then taken his way to young Deering's quarters.

He had talked cheerily upon general topics, and had accepted Deering's half-hesitating invitation to lunch with him—a little to that young man's surprise—and then he had lingered, for another half-hour, until the entrance of Mr. Arden and John Redding—the latter wisely recruited by the sage clergyman as being the very man best fitted to aid in this case, and, as the dominie daringly plagiarised, "a very *pleasant* help in time of trouble."

According to the prearranged programme, it was to be Lysander Deering in person, who, in the course of an afternoon drive, should call upon his nephew, and, if possible, carry him off for as long an outing as was practicable or wise for the invalid.

The hour for this latest arrival to appear and relieve the clergyman and his supporter was fast approaching, when a knock, sharp and short, took young Deering promptly to his door, where he stood for a moment, his back squarely turned toward his visitors, eyeing something which had been handed in to him by an invisible and swiftly-departing messenger.

"Excuse me," he said, after he had bethought himself to close the door, "I have some sort of message from—from Beechwood, I think. With your permission I will read it." And he crossed the room and stood beside a sunny window, his face still more than half turned away. As he read, a flush mounted to his cheek and forehead; and when he had finished the note, he still stood for a moment beside the window, as if forgetful of any presence save his own. Then, slowly, and without turning, he lifted to his lips the half-smoked cigar he had removed from between them upon going to open the door, and drew two or three deep inhalations.

When the weed began to glow brightly, he held up the note by one twisted corner, lighted it with careful puffs, and watched it drop to ashes upon the window sill. Then he went back to his guests.

"It's a word from Beechwood," he said with assumed carelessness. "They *insist* upon my coming to dinner; therefore—I suppose I must dine."

The two callers exchanged quick glances. They interpreted this as being Lysander Deering's method of getting possession of his nephew, and of keeping him, for a few hours, out of danger; and they were not greatly surprised when, shortly after the arrival of the note, Mrs. Deering's carriage halted in the street below, and in it sat the lady herself, with the master of Beechwood beside her.

The appearance of the Deering servant at the door was the signal for their release from duty, and they went away, pausing beside the carriage for a few words of friendly greeting, and nodding as they turned away, after each had bestowed a quick and admiring glance upon the tall young man, gentleman every inch of him, who came hurriedly out to the carriage in correct though hastily donned dinner dress, his head erect, his eyes level and clear, handsome and calmly indifferent to the gaze of the passers-by, as he seated himself opposite his uncle's wife and took the hand she quickly extended in greeting.

"Jove!" ejaculated honest John Redding, as he turned away, "could anyone look at that man and call, or think, him a felon?"

"Nevertheless," quoth the clergyman, "it has been thought and said."

"Yes," replied Redding, with a sniff of contempt; "thought and said—and by whom?"

. . . . . .

When Brenda Deering had appeared at Mr. Baird's and announced herself as come to take away the master of Beechwood, that good man had played into her hands promptly and unconsciously. She had

found the two partners together in the library, Valentine Rodney being closeted with Mrs. Baird, in that lady's especial snuggery, on an upper floor.

"I am glad you are come for me, Brenda," her husband said at once. "Mr. Baird has placed his horses at my disposal, but I think this is best. The fact is, I want to entrap Bruce into going home with us to dine, and I think you may be an able second." And then, before she could answer, "Why, we shall be too strong to resist, really! Valentine is here; we must take her with us."

"Valentine!" Brenda started slightly; she had not counted upon this.

"Miss Wardell was suddenly called from home," explained Mr. Baird. "Miss Rodney came to us this morning."

Brenda was again mistress of herself. "So much the better," she said, smiling; "Bruce can hardly refuse us altogether."

But Valentine had her word to say, when Brenda sought her, a few moments later, in the "snuggery;" and told her how they meant to beguile Bruce Deering out of his retreat in spite of himself.

"You'll hardly need me, Brenda," she remonstrated, looking away from her friend and flushing and paling as she spoke. "And, indeed, I'd rather not go now. Besides, I have promised to drive Mrs. Baird out to the farm in a short time. One of the men has gone away unexpectedly, and you know she does not like to drive the ponies."

. . . . . .

It was a silent party that drove toward Beechwood. Bruce Deering was grave, and left the conversation, such as it was, to be carried on by the others. Brenda was pre-occupied, and her husband, after a brief attempt at cheerfulness, was forced to admit that the day had been a fatiguing one, and that he should be glad to be at home once more, and to rest. He had seated himself in the carriage quite in his old way, erect and dignified, and had so held himself, while they were driving through the streets of Pomfret, bowing here and there in his habitual stately fashion; but when they were fairly out of the town, with its people and its houses behind them, he dropped back upon the cushions and let the weariness creep into his face, and speak in his voice, as he said:

"I want another talk with you, Bruce, quite by ourselves, if Brenda will permit it; but I must rest a little first. We shall have an hour or more before dinner, and I shall leave you to Brenda until then. After dinner we will reverse the programme."

And so it was that Bruce Deering found himself in the Beechwood library, and face to face with his uncle's wife, less than six hours after Jonas Wiggins had turned away from this same stately threshold.

The room was large and splendid, without being cold; its long windows faced the western sunset, and its deep greens, rich bronze, and mellow old oak, were enriched and vivified by the long lances of the late sunset, gleaming through two great windows, upon walls and hangings, busts and books, and classic panellings."

It was toward one of these windows that Brenda walked upon entering the room where Bruce awaited her. It was the farthest point from either of the three doors, which opened respectively upon the

wide hall, just opposite the drawing-room upon the right, and the breakfast-room upon the left.

"Will you come here?" she said, as he arose and stood as if half in doubt whether he should follow or not. "It is the most remote from any possible point where one might be overheard; not that I fear eavesdropping, but because what I have to say must be said with utmost caution." There was a strange look upon her face, a strange tremor in her voice, and, as he came closer and at last stood in the window and confronted her squarely, her look caused him to start and exclaim eagerly:

"Brenda! What is it? Something has happened! Something serious! There has been some awful strain put upon you! *What* is it? Speak—for your own sake; let me help you—at least—"

"Help me! Bruce—if you can help yourself—if we can help each other!" She was trembling as if with an ague, and he turned suddenly, drew forward a low, softly-cushioned chair, and gently placed her in it.

"Brenda," he said quite firmly now, "if you lose your self-control you will be ill; you look faint already. If, as you intimate, what you wish to say concerns me, do not hesitate, thinking to spare me—anything! If it is a trouble of yours, you know there is nothing I would not do for you—to serve or help—"

She put out her hand suddenly; she was very pale now, but calmer, and she met his eyes and seemed to hold them with her own.

"Bruce, promise to answer my questions first, and to ask none of me; we must not remain here like this too long. And, Bruce, don't misunderstand whatever I may say! We have been friends, you and I, since I was a child almost, and you a big schoolboy."

"Yes, Brenda. And—is there a shadow between us now?"

He came closer, and his eyes challenged hers. She read their meaning for a moment. Then suddenly she averted her face.

"I will answer that," she said gently, "when you have answered my questions,—and—have heard what I am about to say. Perhaps—then—it will be you who will ask—questions—of me."

"Brenda, for heaven's sake, explain yourself!"

She drew herself erect in the low seat where he had placed her. "I will," she said, and suddenly threw back the soft lace scarf which had been loosely draped about her shoulders, leaving exposed the simple daintiness of the smooth-fitting bodice of her dinner gown, soft and white, and quite unadorned, save for the jewel which caught together some tiny folds at the throat.

"Bruce," she said again, placing a finger upon this jewelled ornament, "look at *this*." She arose and stood before him, and he bent to examine the jewel.

"Why—" He started back and a puzzled look crossed his face. "Why, that is—"

"This!" she broke in almost breathlessly, as if determined, at last, to have all said—"*this*, Bruce Deering, is the counterpart of a jewel, *a button*, which was found *upon the scene of Joseph Matchin's murder on that very night!*"

"*God!*" And now both faces are deadly pale, and they confront

each other, he staring horrified. Then—suddenly the man starts back, utters a sharp ejaculation, and the red blood comes back and dyes his face, neck, and brow; his hands clench themselves, his eyes flash fire into hers. He comes close beside her and looks straight down into the eyes that must lift themselves to meet his gaze, so close he stands, towering above her.

"Brenda Deering!" he says between set teeth, "why have you thought fit—to tell *me* this—*as* you have told it?"

And, suddenly, so strange is woman, her face changes, her voice trembles, and two tears start from her eyes, and hang upon her lashes, as she answers him.

"Because—Bruce Deering, I feared that, unless you were warned, the *mate* to that button *might be found in your possession.*"

CHAPTER XVII.

TOM WELLS WITHHOLDS "THE NEWS."

BEECHWOOD, as has been already set forth, was the last house at the northern end of Main Street, or "Broadway," as it was sometimes called, of late, by those who foresaw, in the pretty town, the nucleus for a future city. The large house faced the west, with spacious gardens and a paddock at the back; and, beyond these, a dense grove, part of a belt of timber which ran northward for miles, and bounded Pomfret on the east, curving away from the centre of the town, as if to make room for it; closing in upon it again at the south end, and half surrounding that, by no means the most aristocratic, portion of the town.

It was at the south end that Jonas Wiggins was domiciled. There was a rambling path in the edge of this belt of wood, beginning some distance below the Wiggins' house, and skirting the town, until it ended at a tiny foot-bridge crossing a flowing brook, which wound curiously in and out through the woods and across the town, making eccentric curves here and there, and requiring more than one pretty rustic bridge, before it left the streets and outlying meadows to ramble westward.

This bridge, at the end of the wood path, spanned "the creek,"—it was seldom called by any other name. Not far from the foot of the Beechwood premises, and when Jonas Wiggins turned his steps townward, after his interview with Brenda Deering, he scaled the fence, just below the park, and crossed the meadow between the creek and the highway.

The sun was yet warm, although his hours were numbered, and the usual evening pleasure-seekers were beginning to dot the road here and there; this being the much used outlet to the charming country drives and wooded roads to the northward.

"Confound 'em!" muttered Jonas, as he caught the first sprinkling of dust from a swiftly passing phaeton, "everybody's turnin' out on this 'ere road, of course! An' *I* ain't noways anxious to have folks

wonderin' what I'm doin' round these parts. I'm goin' to take the roundaboutest way."

Half-way across the meadow he turned and looked back, attracted by the sound of swift wheels from the northward.

"Jiminy!" he ejaculated, "there she goes! I'd like ter know what fur. It's past bankin' hours, an'—but—mebbe I kin find out; a rig like that ain't agoin' to hide in Pomfret."

He pursued his way, slowly reviewing his late interview. It had not been altogether to his liking. And he began to wonder how he could have been so rebuffed, so cowed, and so easily sent away at last, but little wiser or more secure of his purpose than when he came.

"Confound the woman!" he broke out again. "Ye never kin tell where to take 'em! There's Jane now!" And then a new thought caused him to halt and lean against a tree while he pondered the question: "How should he settle with Jane? And would it be safe to go home to her with that little pill box and its contents still in his possession?"

So pre-occupied was he with this new train of thought, quite as perplexing as the last and of nearer moment, that he had resumed his progress, and reached the little bridge over the creek, before he had observed that the small buttress at the opposite end was occupied, and by no less a personage than his some time rival sportsman, Tom Wells.

Wells sat with his long legs dangling above the little stream, which was very quiet just here, and deeper than in some parts, and, just below him, formed a little pool, where the minnows darted thick, and easily visible. His gun leaned against the rail of the bridge, and his coat hung across it. As Wiggins stepped upon the bridge he looked up quickly.

"Wal, I swan!" he drawled; "you must a stepped mighty soft, I sh'd say! What kind a boots are ye wearin'?"

Wiggins stopped and leaned over the rail. "Same kind as usual," he retorted. "Ketchin' any whales?"

Wells lifted his little net filled with squirming minnows. "Best sort of bait, you bet," he declared cheerfully. "I ain't hot after fishin' much this time o' year, generally speakin', but Jim Green says there's good fishin' up in the north branch, and I'm goin' ter try it a little to-night. Goin' ter be a light moon, ye know." And Wells slid off his perch, made a jump for the bank, emptied his bait in a battered tin can, and threw his coat across his shoulder.

Jonas picked up the gun and looked at it critically. They had bantered each other for a trade more than once.

"I kind o' wanted ter see ye this afternoon, earlier," Tom said carelessly, "ter talk with ye 'bout that rifle of yours; but I ain't time now, that is—unless you're goin' my way."

"Which way's your'n?"

"North'ard. I'm goin' to grub with Jim and Aunt Sally, and I'd better be on the way. Where ye bound?"

"Goin' home."

"Oh! Wal, you took a kind of a roundabout way, seems to me."

Jonas put down the gun, and an ugly flush overspread his face.

He had come directly across from the corner of the meadow nearest the park, and Beechwood was fairly within sight from the bridge.

"I've been doin' a little arrand up to Beechwood," he said, "an' I thought I'd come this way hum. It's tarnal dusty an' hot, an' then I'm always lookin' out for signs of game, ye know. There's a nest of coon 'bout half-way 'tween here and the bend."

"So!" Wells took up his gun. "Wal I hope ye'll git 'em. If I warn't in fer fish jest now, and Jim awaitin' for me, I'd be tempted to take my gun along an' help ye try fer 'em ; as it is—so long, Jonas." And he turned his face to the north, and was soon out of sight behind a bend of the creek with its shrouding underbrush.

For a moment Jonas looked after him, then turned, to take the path in the opposite direction.

He had been standing on the bridge, with Wells a little below him, at the creek's edge, where the turf was soft and damp ; and as he stepped off, almost upon the very spot where Wells had slung his coat across his arm, he saw something lying at his feet ; it was a small and shabby pocket-flask covered with leather.

Before stooping to pick it up, Jonas turned to look about him. Wells was not in sight, and he caught up the flask and went briskly down the narrow footpath.

"That's one streak o' luck anyhow," he soliloquised, "wonder neither of us didn't see the thing drop ; 'pears to be full," shaking it, "and"—unscrewing the top and sniffing its contents—"it's mighty good brandy!" He walked on a few paces, looked about him once more, and regaled himself from Tom's flask.

"There!" he ejaculated, as he stowed it away in a capacious pocket ; "that's good,—an' cheap too! Wonder how soon Tom 'll miss it? Oh, no. *He* ain't no drinkin' man! I recken I've got a pint on yer now. Mr. Tom Wells!"

For some time he went on briskly, then his pace became slower. He stopped, looked about him, and once more refreshed himself from the flask.

"That's good stuff," he muttered ; "I only wish it 'ud help me ter study out what ter do 'bout this here button."

And now he paced on slowly, until some inspiration seemed to seize him, and he struck himself smartly upon the hip.

"Lor!" he said to himself, "why didn't I think of that afore! It's the old dodge, an' I'll try the old place. It'll be safer than in my pockets, or anywhere else! It'll be perfectly safe!"

He had made up his mind to bury his treasure in a place he knew well of old. Bury it, just for the night, and bring it forth on the morrow, in time for his visit to Mrs. Deering.

"'Twon't do fer me to hang out to-night," he ruminated ; "I'd be all in a fuddle by mornin', sure, if I made a night of it with the boys ; an' I want ter be clear-headed ter-morror when I visit my fine lady. Yes, I'll put ye ter bed, my beauty! an' then I'll go home ter Jane, an' let her preach herself hoarser'n a crow. Drat her!"

. . . . . .

Tom Wells was too experienced a woodsman to find difficulty in following Jonas Wiggins, at a considerable distance at first, and at closer

range, when he saw his prey, after taking his second pull from the leathern flask, and turning away from the footpath, go deeper into the woods. He could dodge and drop like an Indian, and he found himself forced to do both more than once, for Jonas became more fox-like as he neared the place of hiding.

But it was done at last, and all traces of his work removed; and then, after another refreshing draught, and a last reconnaissance, Jonas bent his steps homewards.

He was feeling better than at any moment since he had left his nook in the fence corner at the foot of Beechwood Park, and he chuckled gleefully over his prospective encounter with Jane. He had not always come off conqueror in his encounters with his lesser half, but he was sure of his success this time, and he chuckled aloud in anticipation of the battle to come.

Well was it for him that he did not see Tom Wells creeping—creeping—slowly, warily—coming nearer to his hiding-place and his treasure.

"If it was anybody but you, Jonas Wiggins," muttered Wells, as he bent above the discovered hiding-place, "I'd feel too mean to live this minute. But you're a snake in the grass, and I've been set to cut your fangs if I find there's need for it. If what you've put here belongs to *you*, you'll find it here all right when you come after it. If it belongs to somebody *else*, well, we'll see, that's all. Here goes."

First, a thick layer of leaves and grass, with some broken branches laid over artfully, as if they might have fallen so from the tree above; then a layer of earth, not deep, but well smoothed down; next, a flat stone, a little more than a foot square, roughly hewed and somewhat uneven; then another layer of earth, packed above and around a small tin box, six inches by ten, as nearly as he could guess, a box with a hinged cover, but with no lock, nor any better fastening than a stout string, which was soon untied.

Inside the box was a handkerchief, soiled and coarse, and rolled up and fastened with another bit of string. Inside of this, the tiny pill-box, and within the box the amethyst button.

Tom Wells was anything but slow-witted, and when he had looked long and silently at the two golden letters so daintily cut, so damaging, so dangerous in their possibilities, he placed the button carefully in his pocket, and, as rapidly as possible, replaced the pill-box—minus the contents—the kerchief, the string, the tin box, the earth, the stone, all as it was before. Then he hastened away in the direction from whence he came, and, midway between the point where Jonas had left the footpath and the bridge where the two had met, he turned into the woods once more. And now all his movements were rapid, as if time was of value. He found a spot which he could readily identify, and wrapping the button in his own handkerchief, and placing this in the middle of his well-filled shot-pouch, he dug a new hiding-place, and left the amethyst button as safely buried, and better concealed, than it had been before.

"It's a delicate pint to settle!" he meditated, as he hastened from the place. "I couldn't leave that thing in Wiggins' hands, knowin' what I do. I couldn't keep it; and I couldn't risk turnin' it over to—

anyone ; riskin' it's bein' the wrong one, as I might. I'd like to know how Jone Wiggins got hold of that button—an' whose initials them are ! Mr. Detective, you've got me into more business, and queerer business, than I counted on—an' I guess, until I can understand things a leetle better myself, I'll not trouble you with the news from the backwoods."

CHAPTER XVIII.

ONE WOMAN'S COURAGE.

JONAS WIGGINS did not go home as promptly as he had at first intended. Upon second thoughts, not entirely sober, he decided that it was too early, that he was giving Jane too much time.

"I can't set an' hear her clackin' all the evenin' an' half the night, too," he cogitated, "and I feel as if a little sort of soshibility 'd be comfortin' after my call on aristockrasy, an' the rest of it."

He left the woods ; coming out from them at the foot of a little street which brought him soon into the heart of Pomfret.

"I might jest as well look around a bit fer that carriage," he decided ; "though I ain't no ways anxious fer her ter see me."

It was not long before he succeeded in this. Coming around a corner he saw the Beechwood carriage in the act of turning away from the door of Bruce Deering's lodgings, with Bruce himself, sitting opposite Mrs. Deering, and her husband by her side. The vehicle swung about quickly, and drove away, and he knew that the occupants could hardly have seen him.

"I wonder what that means ?" he muttered ; "I don't like the look. Looks as if she was goin' ter consult with that feller ; umph !" grinning at a new mental suggestion, "maybe I'd do well ter consult the old feller !" And so musing he went his way.

Some hours later he appeared before Jane, quite mellowed and amiably voluble. He had taken matters out of her hands, and, having had his own way, found himself suddenly inclined to relate his experiences, colouring them somewhat, and retouching his own part of his interview with the lady of Beechwood so lavishly, as to arouse, upon the part of Jane, a somewhat unkindly scepticism. But he left a break in his highly coloured story. He utterly refused to confide to her the secret of the hiding-place of the amethyst button.

"'Tain't no use argyfyin' 'bout *that*," he assured her. "It's safe, an' that's enough !" And Jane, with an eye to future possibilities, should Jonas go successfully through with his second interview, desisted, and went to her pillows to ponder upon the chances of the morrow, and lay some plans of her own, dependent, more or less, upon the morrow's success.

Jonas remained at home until almost noon. Jane's over-night influence was still strong upon him, and she had convinced him, for the moment, that he would be wise to pay his second visit to Beechwood while sober and in his right mind.

"I'd give somethin' ter foller him," mused Jane as she watched him

slouching townward. But, 'tain't no use; an' I don't 'spose I'll see him agin afore midnight, if he *did* promise to come right back, as soon as the things was settled. There's one comfort though: Jone's too stingy ter let them saloon fellers git much money out of *him;* he can stan' a heap o' treatin', but he ain't much on the *treat.*"

But Jane was not destined to an afternoon of solitude. Less than an hour had passed, when the door was flung open, and Jonas fairly hurled himself across the threshold; his eyes were staring, his face purple with rage; and for some long moments his blatant noise filled the room and drowned her attempts at speech with an awful outpour of profanity intermingled with accusations and threats. The *button!* The *button was gone!*

. . . . . .

As the hour appointed for the second visit of Jonas Wiggins drew near, things seemed to shape themselves as Brenda had wished they might, and feared they would not. Mr. Deering, by the doctor's orders, was to keep his room for a part of each day, sleeping as he could, and resting, in perfect quiet, if sleep refused to come to him. These hours of rest were taken directly after luncheon, and it had been Brenda's custom to remain with, or near him; sometimes she sat beside him with some bit of dainty needlework in her hand, while he lay with half-closed eyes, and soft words dropped from her lips, slowly, and at intervals; sometimes she wielded a great downy fan, and talked or read in low tones; but she seldom left him, save when he sank to sleep, lulled by her gentle ministrations, and this did not always happen.

On this day, however, Mr. Deering had fatigued himself before luncheon by his determined efforts to see that his beloved domain had been well cared for in his absence. He had visited stable, paddock, and garden; had walked about the grounds, including orchard and park, and had finished the morning closeted in his own especial sanctum with his nephew.

What passed between them was unknown, but they came forth to luncheon, the elder leaning upon the arm of the younger; both were grave, and one looked pale and weary, but there rested upon both faces a look of full confidence and mutual understanding.

"Brenda, my dear," said the elder man, as they took their places at the dainty table, "Bruce thinks I have been too active this morning, and I fancy he is right; at any rate, I feel as if I could fall asleep without an effort, and you need not sit with me to-day; instead, if you feel inclined, you might drive into town with Bruce, who thinks he must return at once; and you might bring Valentine back with you."

But Brenda had murmured an excuse. Mrs. Merton had not yet returned, and there was still much to look after; she and Sarita could find enough to do; besides, Mr. Baird had promised to bring Valentine home that evening; and would not Bruce remain longer? If not, Hall should drive him in and bring back the mail.

So it came about that Brenda sat alone, at the appointed hour, in the little reception room, fully decided as to the words she should say when Jonas Wiggins again confronted her. She would refer him to Bruce Deering—nothing more.

She had instructed the parlour-maid, who was to receive and admit the visitor, and she was a trifle surprised when Sarita opened the door, and said :

"Madam, here is a—a woman, who says she is *expected*," and she moved back to let the big figure of Jane Wiggins fill her place in the doorway.

At sight of the bold, coarse face, Brenda arose, her look haughtily inquiring.

"Expected?" she echoed.

The woman made a stride forward.

"I'm Jonas Wiggins' *wife*," she announced with much deliberation.

Brenda turned toward Sarita with a quick gesture; "close the door," she said, and Sarita retired, softly and slowly, with her eyes fixed upon the strange visitor, until the door closed, shutting out her view of the tall figure in its shabby gown and bonnet.

Brenda did not resume her seat, nor did she ask the other to be seated. She only moved a step nearer the wife of Jonas Wiggins, saying :

"What is your errand, Mrs. Wiggins?"

It was utterly impossible to disguise or keep down the virago in Jane Wiggins ; she was by nature a female bully, and, while she came before Brenda fully intent upon playing the part of virtue in distress, a reluctant intruder ; the latter was too apt a reader of her sex to be, even for a moment, deceived.

"I've come, ma'am," began Jane, glibly, "on account of Mr. Wiggins; he ain't by no means well to-day, and he said as he had promised to call. You'd be sure to be expecting him, and so I must come in his place."

"I see!" quietly. "I suppose, then, you understand the nature of his business—his errand here?"

"Oh, yes'm, and I'm sure I hope you won't take no offence, ma'am, if I say that Jonas an' me didn't quite agree about that there button. Jonas was not thinkin' no harm, ma'am, when he come an' proposed what he did to you. He wanted to do you a favour, an', bein' a poor man that's met with a good deal of misfortin here and there, he thought it no harm to take a little gift like, an' that you'd feel more comfortable to have the button in your keepin'."

"One moment—" began Brenda, but the woman talked straight on.

"Ye see he hadn't spoke about it to me, an' kind o' come to you at first thought, without stoppin' to reckon much about the rights an' wrongs of it—"

"Mrs. Wiggins—"

"But when he come to tell me, *I* see at once it wouldn't do. 'Jonas,' I says, 'if that's jest somethin' the lady's *lost*, it's all right fur you to return it, and be paid fur your trouble. *But* if you think it has anything to do with the *murder*,'—in spite of herself Brenda shuddered at the word,—'you ain't no right to give it to *no one* exceptin' *the sheriff*.'"

Brenda could hardly restrain a start, and, now that the woman had paused for a word from her, she could only say at the moment :

"Well?"

"Well," repeated Jane, catching up the word, "after some con-

siderin' we've concluded that we'd try a kind of compermise. Since he's thought it over, Jonas feels jest the same as *I* do. It ain't *right* to give that button up to *anyone*, except as I've mentioned, and we know that we're likely to git ourselves into trouble if we was to keep it an' not let on. Sech things leak out mostly, some time or ruther. But we want to do you a sarvice if we can."

"I shall be glad to learn," broke in Brenda, with a ring of impatience in her voice, "how you propose to do it."

"Well, ma'am, I'll tell ye, an' this is Jonas's offer as well as mine. He told ye, he says, that we wanted to go away from Pomfret, and was too poor to see any way of goin'. And while we can't feel it *jest right* ter give ye the button, we might, ter serve ye, jest *keep it out of the way of anybody else; d'ye see?*"

"No," said Brenda, coldly, "I do not."

"Well, we won't give it up, and we won't keep it. An' this is Mr. Wiggins's offer. He'll take that button an' hide it som'ers, an' we'll both swear not to tell, an' not to dig it up, an' we'll go off clear away from Pomfret an' never come back, an' mighty glad to do it too; an' when this trouble is all blowed over, so't won't do no harm, Jone'll write an' tell ye where he hid the button, and ye can git it if ye think fit."

Jane had grown more and more engrossed in her own wordy effort, and had failed to note what would have been patent to anyone who had ever seen Brenda Deering in a "noble rage," and she took fresh heart of grace, when the other said very quietly:

"And what is to be your reward?"

"Reward! Why, I thought you an' Jonas had settled all that. I should think it 'ud be worth a good many hundred dollars to have that there button *with yer own 'nitials on it* kept out of the court, an' stopped from figuring *in a murder trial?*"

All unwittingly, Jane had applied her last straw. Brenda swept toward the door, and, standing beside it, turned half-way back.

"If you have no further kindly suggestions to offer, perhaps you will charge yourself with a short message to Jonas Wiggins. Tell him that I will have nothing whatever to do with this business. It in *no way* concerns me. If he thinks it will interest Mr. Bruce Deering he would better apply to him with this fine and exceedingly conscientious proposal. And tell him once more what I assured him of yesterday: if he ever approaches me again, annoys me in any manner, or allows a whisper of this to go abroad, he shall be arrested for blackmailing, and worse. I do not *believe* his tale of *finding* that button, or that he obtained it honestly." She had struck the bell while uttering this final sentence, and with the last word she flung the door wide open. Instantly the dog Samson bounded to her side; and as she stepped across the threshold, with erect head and flashing eyes, the man Robbins came hurrying toward her.

"Robbins," she said, without a backward glance, "show this person out."

Alone in her room but a moment later, Brenda Deering paced its length with burning eyes and cheeks, and lips firmly, yes, stubbornly compressed.

"I will not submit to it," she whispered between sharp breaths; "I will not so humiliate myself. Let what will come of it! The fault is not mine! The crime shall rest where it belongs. I wash my hands of all."

She was not lacking in courage and mental force, and she moved swiftly about the room, preparing by the use of cool and odorous waters, freely dashed upon a burning face, to meet her husband, with the outward signs of the emotion that had so lately swayed her, and which still raged within, obliterated. She had passed through a day and night of horror, had been beset by doubts, fears, and terrors; but from it all she had arisen with a mind cleared, and the knowledge that, for her, but one way was possible. She could not deal with those people, neither to save herself or another; and she knew that henceforward for many days, perhaps for always, she must live in suspense if not in danger; must carry in her heart a fear and dread unutterable, and *never*, through all, must that heart be betrayed by her face.

Ah! Brenda Deering, would your courage have failed you had you but known what the near future had in store?

CHAPTER XIX.

A TROUBLED HOUSEHOLD.

VALENTINE RODNEY came home to Beechwood in the early dusk, and went at once to her own dainty apartments, for this big house was literally her home, and its best had been freely and lovingly placed at her disposal, Brenda herself having chosen the exquisite furnishings for the sunny and airy little suite, which had been Val's especial favourite.

There was the pretty bedroom, in which all was soft-tinted and cheerful; the tiny dressing-room beyond, with its great mirror and charming toilet appliances; and beyond these a cosy boudoir, with a glass enclosed and curtained alcove, in which stood Val's own dainty writing-desk, some vases of great white lilies growing and blooming in the sunlight, and a revolving case of her favourite books.

She had been admitted by one of the maids, and upon being told that Mr. Deering, after a long nap, was now in the library dictating some letters which Brenda was transcribing for him, she had bidden the girl not to disturb them, but to tell Sarita that she would dress at once and come down for dinner, which was always a candlelight function at Beechwood.

The warmth of the sun's rays was still in the evening air, and the doors stood wide open upstairs and down. Valentine found her own door ajar, and entered with a sigh of satisfaction. She loved every stick and stone of Beechwood, and felt, as she threw aside her hat and light mantle, and flung herself down in an easy-chair to look about her for a moment and take it all in, that she had indeed come back to her own.

Sitting thus she became aware of a soft patter-patter over the carpet, and a smile rippled over the bright face.

"Cap!" she called. "Cappie, where are you?"

There was a quick yelp of delight, and the curtain opening upon the dressing-room was thrust aside at the bottom, as a shaggy white Spitz, with a funny black nose and bright brown eyes, with almost a human look of intelligence in them, rushed upon her, dancing, fawning, leaping his delight at the return of his young mistress, and barking a loud but sincere welcome.

Val Rodney loved all dumb animals; but most of all she loved a dog and a horse. Cap was her own especial pet, and, as such, enjoyed all the privileges of his mistress's domain when she was present, and it was easy enough to understand how, having found her door ajar, he had entered, taken possession, and fallen asleep in her dressing-room.

"Ah, Cap," cried his mistress, "you are really the first member of the family to welcome me home. And now you are teasing for a frolic. Well,"—she had left her door still ajar upon entering, and she now arose, saying,—"we must not wake the sleepers, Cappie. If I must give you a romp, we must close the door."

As she moved toward it, however, the dog sprang before her, and his bark became suddenly fierce and angry, while his ears and tail stood erect and bristling.

"Cap, come away, sir!" she cried, as a modest tap sounded outside the door.

The well-trained dog drew reluctantly back, uttering low growls as he moved, and in answer to his mistress's "come in," Sarita entered slowly, a deprecating half-smile upon her face.

"I hope you will pardon my intrusion so soon," began the woman when Valentine had given her a graciously friendly greeting; "and I need not ask if you are very well, Miss Valentine; I heard Cap's bark up here, and it made me remember that I must ask of you a pardon immediately, at once; and," turning to shake a slim brown finger at the now sulking dog, who replied to the gesture with a low growl, "and Monsieur Captain, *he* should sue for pardon too; indeed, but for *him*, there would have been no mischief."

"Indeed, Sarita," smiled Valentine. "Has Cappie been doing some new mischief? I hope he has not troubled you seriously?"

"Oh, mademoiselle!"—(Sarita's English and French were sometimes interchangeable)—"that is just what we may never find out, perhaps; I can but hope *l'offense* is not too great; *en vérité* I meant it not to happen so! It was—yes, it *was* two days ago that some letters came for yourself, and I, knowing not where to send them, put them, as you said, in your dressing-room. The doors were open, and Célie had been making the room fresh, and letting in the air as usual. And, *le chien*, I had been too good to him, and had let him follow me upstairs; I had placed the letters—but come and *see*, mademoiselle, they are just as I found them." She moved toward the dressing-room, Valentine following, and pointed to a small inlaid table near the curtained entrance, with a gesture and a grimace more eloquent than any words.

Upon the table was a little silver letter-tray with three or four snowy

envelopes lying across one end, and upon the other, a handful of fragments, that told at a glance their own story.

"It was mine, the carelessness," went on the Frenchwoman, "for the window was open. I went out, outside, to speak to Célie, and, in a moment almost, thinking of the little dog, went to bring him away with me; we had always to *make* him go out from your rooms; not one can call him away; and when I come back, behold!" spreading out her ten fingers above the bits of paper, "the letter must have blown to the floor, and Cap had found it. I preserved it so much as I could; but all were in fragments. I fear you cannot read a line, mademoiselle."

Valentine had picked up a handful of the fragments, and began scanning them carelessly, and when Sarita ceased speaking, she laughed, and tossed them down again.

"Don't let it trouble you, Sarita; I think it can hardly be an important letter; at any rate I shall not try to read the riddle now. Just lay the damage, if any has really been done, between the window and Cap. And now—tell me, is Mrs. Deering dressed for dinner?"

"*Oui*—yes, mademoiselle." There was a shade of dissatisfaction in Sarita's eyes, and she drew a step nearer the little table. "I am glad it's not important—but it did annoy me, for I knew, by the bit of the outside which I could see," and she put a finger upon a scrap, somewhat larger and less defaced than the rest—"I thought it was a foreign postmark."

"No doubt, Sarita; I can see, by the writing, that it was from Mr. Brook Deering, and not likely to contain any news of importance." Valentine turned away and began to finger the things upon her dressing table. "If Mrs. Deering's maid is at liberty, please ask her if she will come to my assistance; it will soon be time for the dinner-bell. I suppose Lettie will arrive to-morrow. No; you may leave Cap with me; and, really, I can't blame the dog. He has a fancy for tearing paper into tiny bits, and I have sometimes given him envelopes and stray notes to make mincemeat of. But I have never known him to destroy anything before, and he obeys me, you know, perfectly."

In the interval, between the going of Sarita and the coming of Mrs. Deering's maid, Miss Rodney came back to the little table, and began to examine the fragmentary letter more critically than at first.

"It's from Brook undoubtedly," she said to herself; "I wonder why, after all these months, he has written to *me* again? Pshaw!—there's not half a letter here! Cap, did you swallow it? and do foreign letters agree with you? It's postmarked Havre, but the date is unreadable. Havre! I wonder if, by any chance, Brook *is* really coming home?"

Mr. Deering was fastidious about many things, and the Beechwood dinner might always have been *en evidence*. There was no day, when the family dined at home, that one or more guests might not have taken seats at that always dainty table, without disturbing the equanimity of either hostess or cook.

But, scrupulous as he always was about his table and service, and fastidious in his own attire, the thing which gave him the greatest pleasure in the long dinner hour was not his fine wines nor faultless

entrées, but the fair faces and charming toilets, which added the final grace to his board.

As Valentine swept into the dining-room and seated herself at the round table midway between her guardian and his wife, she received a smile from both, and smiled in return; and the candles glowed softly, the cut glass and silver gleamed, great roses shed their fragrance, and a light ripple of talk ran on; and who could have fancied, seeing it all, that the heart of each was heavy; that one was filled with anxious doubt and dread; one ached beneath a horrible certainty; and one was heavy with tender pity, and a sorrow that bade farewell to hope.

When the dessert was at last before them, and the servants dismissed, Mr. Deering said, looking from one to the other, "I have not heard from Brook, by-the-bye, for a fortnight or more. The boy is growing careless, or, has he written to you, dear?" catching a glance which flashed between Brenda and her cousin. "The scamp always prefers a lady correspondent, I know. I can't blame him there."

Valentine uttered a half laugh. "I see you know the story," she said to Brenda. "Sarita is disconsolate."

"Yes. Of course she could not wait for you to tell of the disaster. She really thinks that Cap made an especial effort to cover her with confusion; she did her duty, however, and even searched in the shrubbery, under your window, and succeeded in finding two or three fragments; one, the largest, bearing the word *Havre* upon a scrap of envelope."

"And so you guessed—"

"I guessed that Cappie must have tried to devour a letter from Brook."

"Ah!" broke in Mr. Deering, "so you *do* correspond with our young globe-trotter, missy! I thought—"

"Now, guardy, just wait, and I'll tell you all about it." And Valentine related the story of Cappie's raid upon the wind-blown letter. "And, truly, good people," she concluded, "it's my first letter from Brook since he left London, and I can't imagine a cause for his present writing. As for the letter, I don't think we could get enough sense out of the handful of fragments Sarita contrived to save, to give any sort of information. She can't have secured half of the letter, and I can't see where the remainder could have gone! Cap might have swallowed a *few* fragments, but—*half a sheet!* I'll bring it down if you like, guardy, and we'll try what we can make of it, all three."

But he shook his head. "No," he said, "you and Brenda may study over it, if you like, and give me the result, or as much as I have a right to. I think I'm tolerably sure of hearing from the lad soon. In his last letter he hinted gently at a fast lessening letter of credit, and I read him a lesson on extravagance in my reply. He is waiting, I daresay, until his bank is exhausted, or hoping that I may relent and send him a new remittance."

His young wife turned upon him a look of mild surprise.

"Why, dear," she said, with a half smile, "I never supposed Brook was extravagant. He is very generous—"

"Yes; I don't object to that. And I don't object to a little waste of money. One can be young but once. As you say, Brook *is* generous—with his money, at least; and he has bestowed, somewhere, upon someone, a very pretty sum. But never mind! We'll settle him at home by and by. Try your riddle, Valentine; we will see what you can sift from that."

When they were all seated in the softly-lighted drawing-room, a sudden gravity and stillness fell upon them, broken at last by Valentine, who came close beside her guardian, and dropped down upon an ottoman at his elbow.

"Guardy," she began with a pretty air of deprecation, "do you feel well enough to talk—just a little—upon a disagreeable subject? Would it tire you too much?"

"Not if you very much wish to talk with me, Dot."

"I do, and so does Brenda; there's so much that we don't fully understand. Only—Brenda is so anxious to save you annoyance—"

He took the little hand of the speaker in his own, and turned his face toward the fair woman who had crossed the room, while Valentine was proffering her request, and placed herself behind his chair, leaning upon its cushioned back, with a hand placed caressingly upon his shoulder.

"Well," he said, very gently, "why should we not talk over this trouble which comes so close to all of us? My princess, do not fear; your old lover is not quite out of the running—yet. Come," putting up his other hand and drawing her white arm about his neck, "sit down here beside me and let us get it over. Now, ask me what you will, Val, my dear."

After all, it was Brenda who put the first question, while Val sat silent, her face half averted.

"You have been talking with Mr. Baird and—the others. What do they think? What—do *you* think of Bruce's position? I don't understand!—he has not been *arrested*—he seems to be quite at liberty. And yet—"

"And yet he stands accused of murder! Is that what you would say?" he answered, cutting off her last word. "I will tell you; we three can afford to be plain with each other; we all believe, alike, that a Deering never yet shed human blood?"

It sounded like a question, but both his hearers sat silent. The face of one was averted—the face of Brenda Deering; but Valentine turned and looked him steadily in the eyes.

"Yes," he went on, "our sympathies are with him. We believe in him, and yet—it has taken all the *finesse* of a shrewd detective, speaking through Mr. Baird; all the influence of Pomfret's most popular clergyman—speaking here, there, everywhere; all the weight of Baird's influence, he speaking for himself and for me; and, behind us, our friends—the men who have made, and who sustain, Pomfret; and, back of all, money without stint. It has taken all this to keep Bruce Deering a free man, if you can call a man free who is bound by his word, and by his bond, and is constantly under the surveillance of the sheriff and his deputies."

"And—is it really true, dear, that the popular belief—the belief of the majority—is *against* him?"

"I don't know about the *majority*. There is an element—I may say a *strong* element—against him. And, so far as we can learn, it is composed, a large part of it at least, of the people who prophecy upon the street corners and in the saloons. Joe Matchin, heaven rest his soul, was a 'labouring man.' Bruce Deering is an 'aristocrat,'—reason enough why all the 'labouring men' who are left alive should turn against him. I think I may say that the better class, our own sort, and the thinking element, are either in open sympathy with Bruce, or discreetly silent. But there is a large body of the other element in Pomfret, and our sheriff is their prophet."

He had begun in low, measured, almost gentle tones; but the bitterness could not keep itself out of his voice; the scorn he felt for Bruce Deering's accusers *would* manifest itself through eye and lip.

They were silent a moment, then Valentine turned her face toward him.

"Do you think," she began, "can they—*dare* they, arrest him—now or—at any time—even yet?"

"That, my dear girl, will depend much upon circumstances. Already they have a fine array of that dangerous, and often false, sort of evidence called circumstantial: if they should chance upon more of this—and who knows, the sheriff might, probably would, deem it his duty to—take him into custody. Princess, what is it?"

Brenda Deering had started suddenly, withdrawn her hand from his, and turned a pallid face and startled eyes, first toward Valentine, and then away from them both.

"Nothing," she articulated, with a quiver in her voice. "Nothing—only—it's all so miserable! And the thought—this evidence—dear, tell us,—tell Val, she has not heard so much as I perhaps—what the evidence against him *is*."

"Why, Val, my dear, has no one told you the flying news? Miss Wardell—or Mrs. Baird?"

"Not all—I—I did not want to hear it—from *them*."

"And you do want to hear the wretched business from me? Very well, you shall hear all that I can tell you, both of you; and then we will have no more of this unhappy subject. First, then, Bruce was first upon the scene of the murder, therefore he *may* have been the assassin." Valentine shuddered. "He looked, they say, wild and dishevelled, there was blood upon his hands, upon his face, upon his linen. He is declared to have been an enemy to poor Joe Matchin. Matchin has been heard to threaten him, to denounce him as an enemy." Val caught her breath sharply. "Since the first inquiry before the coroner, there has been evolved this theory: at midnight the bank of course was locked, Matchin, partially undressed, as was his custom, and probably asleep. The lock had not been picked, *ergo* must have been opened with a key. Matchin was found with his coat on, therefore must have arisen and dressed himself; consequently, the midnight visitor must have been *known* to Matchin; must have possessed a key. Matchin must have arisen and donned his coat to receive his visitor. Nothing had been taken from the bank, they say;

therefore it must have been a case of *revenge*,—Bruce and Matchin were ill friends, and—Bruce is said to have had a key to the outer door of the bank."

"Horrible!" cried Brenda, while Valentine shuddered and hid her face. After a brief silence she lifted it, but still held it turned away.

"When—" she whispered, "when will they—try—him."

"My dear, as yet he is not formally and legally indicted."

"Indicted?"

"Yes. I see you are not learned in criminal law. A suspected person may be arrested and put under bonds, as Bruce is now; this before a magistrate. Next, he must appear before the Grand Jury, and if this august body decides him guilty, his bail is increased and he is left at liberty; or, bail is denied him, and he is sent to prison."

"Oh!—and when—"

"The Grand Jury was dismissed just two months before the killing of poor Matchin, consequently Bruce has about three and a half months of waiting and suspense before him. But during this time, it will go hard if we do not unravel this mystery, and set him right before his peers.—Now—is there anything more?"

"No," replied Brenda, "not now." But Valentine simply shook her head.

No more was said concerning Bruce Deering. And soon the master of the house took up the evening paper with a half-playful, altogether courtly apology to the ladies. Soon after, Valentine arose. "I will go upstairs, I think, and see if I can reconstruct Cousin Brook's letter," she said. They had grown up together as cousins, she and the two young Deerings, though no drop of kindred blood flowed in their veins. But while she often referred to Brook Deering as "Cousin Brook," Bruce Deering had been, first, plain Bruce, and later, Mr. Deering; but never, since the days of childhood, had she styled him "cousin."

Once in her dressing-room, she gathered up the fragments of Brook's letter, and made pretence of trying to fit together the jagged edges; but it was only pretence, enacted, it would seem, to convince herself that she could find interest in more than the one absorbing theme; and she threw them from her soon and sprang up, throwing out her hands in a gesture of passionate self-abandonment.

"I *can't* ENDURE *it!*" she cried aloud. "I *cannot!* What can I *do!* For I must *do something*, or I shall go mad! It is horrible! horrible! *horrible!*"

CHAPTER XX.

FRIEND AND FOE.

BRUCE DEERING had not been in his room five minutes on the day after his return from Beechwood before he received two visitors—the one coming close upon the heels of the other.

Each of these men had rapped at his door at an early hour, and each had lain in wait for his return, but shrewdness had overmatched vigil-

ance, and Jonas Wiggins, who had been loitering on the opposite side of the street, was quite unconscious that Tom Wells, after making his first call, had quietly established himself in the long stair hall, which ran straight through the building from front to rear, pacing its length with the silence of an Indian when not observed, and seeming, when a door opened, or someone crossed the hall, to be in the act of knocking here or there for admission, or of going or arriving, according as his face was turned to front or rear; and Jonas was filled with amazement and chagrin unbounded when, after waiting a decent five minutes to allow his quarry to house himself comfortably and inhale one breath of solitude, he sauntered easily across the street, and, stepping jauntily, began the ascent of the long straight flight of stairs, only to hear a resounding knock, to look up, and to see at the very door which he knows to be Bruce Deering's, the tall figure of Tom Wells, to meet his quizzical, mocking glance, and see him turn, catch off his hat as the door swings open, and then disappear within.

The quizzical look vanished from the eyes of Tom Wells as he stood face to face with Bruce Deering, and he went straight to the heart of his business the moment they had exchanged greetings.

"Mr. Deering," he began briskly, "I've come to give ye a bit of information, meanin' it kindly, as I hope ye'll take it; but, afore I begin, jest let's step to your winder and see if Jonas Wiggins has been able to git himself out of your hallway since he saw me, one ahead of him, knocking at your door."

They crossed to the window side by side, and stood there looking down through the half-opened blinds.

"He ain't got out yet," went on Wells. "Can't make up his mind to give it up, or come in second best, all to once." Then, in answer to a look of inquiry upon Deering's face, "The fact is, I kind of suspected he'd be a comin' to see ye soon as possible. I've been sort of keepin' an eye on him for a while, an' I thought I'd jest come in ahead, in case he meant to try any of his meanness. Ah, ha! there he goes! Now, Mr. Deering, there ain't no danger of my bein' heard, is there?"

"Only by myself," with polite reserve.

"Mr. Deering, may I ask you jest one question?" His honest eyes met the eyes of the other squarely. Bruce felt his reserve melting.

"Ask it," he said.

"I happen to know that Wiggins went out to Beechwood yesterday, and he says he went to take a message; was that the truth?"

Deering shook his head. "Don't ask *me* a question that can be answered better at Beechwood," he said, with a patient half smile. He knew that Tom Wells was his friend, and a man to be trusted. "Put it some other way if you can, Wells. You are puzzling me."

"Well, I don't mean to puzzle you long, Mr. Deering, so here goes. Yesterday I was asked to look a little after Jonas Wiggins, and I set out to do it. I found that he paid a visit out to Beechwood, an' then took acrost lots an' went over the creek, by the bridge, jest below the Hitchlock medder. He took to the woods from there, an', after some little shufflin' around, as if he didn't want to be looked at none too close, he dug up the ground an' a stone slab, alongside a big tree

that he seemed quite well acquainted with, an' he took somethin' out of his pocket an' buried it there in the hole—"

"*Buried!*" The word came involuntarily from Deering.

"Yes, sir, *buried*, and it seemed sech a derned queer thing for Jonas to do, that when he had got good an' away—*I* jest went and—and *dug it up.*"

"You did!" Deering's face was very grave. "What was it, Wells? Can you tell me—or—"

"Oh, I can tell. I've come for jest that."

"Then—have you brought it with you?"

"It was a sleeve button," said Wells, as if he had not heard the last question, "small an' han'sum', with a little shiny stone set in it, jest the exact colour of a vilet in the sunshine, an' it had sort of writ in the vilet stone two 'nitials. Now, Mr. Deering, I knew that Jone Wiggins don't mean ye no good, an' that he'd do ye a bad turn, more 'an likely, if he got half a chance, an' I kind of put several things together. For instance, some time ago, Jone Wiggins begun tryin' ter hurt ye, with his tongue, I mean; an' he done it all in a sort of sly way; but of late, he's got more bold, and don't seem to care who hears his talk, an', ses I, what's the reason his gittin' so peart? I knew he'd got somethin' in his head; an' *I* ain't the only one o' your friends, for I *be* yer friend, Mr. Deering, that thinks so!"

Deering put out his hand quickly. "I believe it Wells," he said. "Go on, please."

"Well, there ain't much more. When I put his call to Beechwood, and the burying this button, and the two 'nitials on the button, together, I says, that means dirt for Mr. Deering or Mrs. Deering; for your 'nitials an' hern's jest the same, ye know."

"Then—the initials were mine? B. D.?"

"B. D. Yes, sir."

Bruce Deering faced about and took two slow turns across the room, with his brows knit into a frown; then he came back.

"Wells," he asked, "what did you do with the button? Have you shown it to—anyone?"

"No, sir. And I don't know's I *mean* ter—not yet, anyhow!"

"And—if it is not with you, may I ask—"

"I'll tell ye," broke in Wells. "I jest took a leaf out of Jonas's book an' went and buried the thing agin—in another place. It's safe enough."

"Wells," said the other, laying a hand on the hunter's brawny shoulder, and speaking with grave earnestness, "you have called yourself my friend—"

"And so I *be!*" Wells broke in.

"And," went on Deering, "I believe you are an honest man, a truthful man. Tell me," the hand upon the shoulder pressed hard, "do *you* think that I killed Joe Matchin?"

"No! Never!—not for *one minit!*"

"Thank you again! Now, do you think that button was *mine?*"

"The man hesitated. "If it *was* your'n," he declared at last, "it don't foller that 'tain't all right; you might a lost it, or Jonas might a stole it; I wouldn't put it past him. You see there ain't but *one* other in Pomfret that 'ud be likely to own sech a thing with *them* 'nitials."

"True. That button, if brought into court, would be very much against me. What was Wiggins coming to me for, do you know?"

"Wal, I surmise that he, thinkin' the button's where he can find it when he wants it, calcalates to do a little blackmailin' business, or else he wants ter sell it to you for a good round sum."

"About the same thing."

"Jest about."

"And, Wells, will you tell me—what *you* mean to do with it?"

Wells drew himself erect, and threw up one hand, as if about to take an oath.

"That button's perfectly *safe jest where it is.* And I'm goin' to *leave* it there, Mr. Deering, until the man *or woman* that killed Joe Matchin is *found;* an' *then,* if that there little button'll help to *land him or her on the gallows, it'll be dug up and forthcomin'—let him or her be who they will. Amen!*"

"Amen!" repeated Deering, solemnly, and turned away. Going to a desk near the further window he came back with something shut in his closed right hand.

"Wells," he said, "I am going to trust you fully. Look! Was the button like *this?*"

Wells started, and looked from the jewel to the face of Deering and back again.

"Yes," he said slowly, "it was like that."

"Very well. Now, Wells, you call yourself my friend; if the time should come when another name than mine should become identified with the button you have hidden away, will you, if I should ask it, testify that you have seen *its mate* in my possession? Stop, look again, is that other button *fully as large as this,* or is it *smaller?*"

The man looked, took the button and looked again, holding it and turning it over thoughtfully in his hand. Then he shook his head and handed it back.

"I don't know," he said slowly; "I can't be sure. It looks the same, but whether or no it's jest as big I can't say. I wish—I wish I hadn't seen this here. As to my testifyin' about it, Mr. Deering—if the time ever comes when I think *you're* the guilty man—an' it'll take a good deal to make me think it—I'll tell anything I know! But—if I think ye want me to help ye to screen somebody *else,* I jest *can't* do it! Look here, Mr. Deering," with sudden animation, "is this 'ere button *your'n?*"

For a moment Deering seemed to consider, then he answered, "Yes, Wells, *this* button is *mine.*"

"Wal, I've about concluded that the other *ain't.* The more I think of it, the more I imagine the t'other button *is littler* than this one of yours." He was watching the other keenly, and he saw the quick clinching of the strong hand, and a sudden compression of the lip. "But here's what I started to say: I can't destroy the button I found in that hole; 'twouldn't be right, not yet; and I aim to do right, though I ain't no way conscience-smit about robbin' Jonas Wiggins' glory hole. But *this 'ere* button's *your'n. Why don't you smash it* and git it out of the way for good?"

"No!" came the answer with quiet promptness. "I shall keep

this button, Wells, *at least* as long as you continue to keep the other."

"Wal, maybe you're right; anyhow I guess you and me understand each other, and I don't know as I've got much more to say. Le's see if there's any sign of Wiggins yet."

While he looked from the window, peering down and around, as far as eye could reach, Deering stood with a troubled look where the other had left him, and for a moment he let his anxiety show in his face; evidently it had been a growing anxiety. Suddenly he clinched his fists, and threw back his head, like a man who has resolved to face and to know the worst, and came quickly behind Wells, as the latter still gazed down upon the street.

"Wells,—you spoke of a man *or woman;*—do you think—does anyone for a moment imagine that a woman did the deed?"

"Well—" Wells was especially fond of beginning his sentences with this word, and he uttered it now deliberately, and without turning his head. "Well—ye know how it is—folks will talk. Now I don't 'spose no woman born ever hit them blows on poor old Matchin's crown, but I wouldn't say that—a woman might not a been *mixed up* in it. Ye see—" here he turned sharply about—"there's Matchin's gal, Rose"—there was a sudden lifting of the shadow on Deering's face, and Wells turned his eyes away—"there's queer talk goin' around; and I, for one, would be mighty glad to hunt some of it to its hole. But there 'tis! You can't run down a flyin' roomer, and anyone can set one goin'. I'll tell ye *one* little thing. Ye see, the sheriff and me didn't exactly hit it off jest at first; he 'peared to think I was kinder on his ground; making myself too numerous; but I've set that about straight. He ain't the first real smart man that took kindly to soft sawder. Well, sir, he came to me last evenin', an' he showed me a note somebody'd writ him—'nonymous, ye know—an' it run about like *this:* '*Mr. Sheriff—Don't you be lookin' so hard after the man that did that killin', that ye forgit there's* WIMEN *in the world, most allus* THERE'S A WOMAN IN IT.' What d'ye think of *that* fer a 'nonymous one?"

"I am wondering"—Bruce Deering had completely mastered himself while the other was speaking, and there was nothing more to be read in his face or voice—"I am wondering how the sheriff happened to show you such a note as that."

Wells laughed, and his lip curled. "He had, somehow, got a notion that the letter come from *me.*"

"And—did it?"

"Did it? *No*, sir!"

"And what did you answer him."

"Well," with a sly grin, "I didn't deny it; not right up and down." He turned to the window again, and added, over his shoulder and with elaborate carelessness: "Thought I might as well wait till we see which way the cat jumped. Whoever writ that letter's got his mind on some woman; an' it's goin' to come out." He turned away from the window. "There's Jonas comin' around the corner! He's gittin' tired waitin'."

"You think he was coming here?"

"*Know* it! Been here same as I was, before ye come back from Beechwood."

"Wells, I want to ask one more question. Who set you to watch Wiggins?"

Wells took a moment to consider. "I don't see no harm in givin' ye a *hint*," he finally said; "you've got some good friends workin' for ye; you know that." Bruce nodded. "An' I daresay you know they've got a city detective somewhere around. Well, this detective give the word to some of your friends, to look a little after Jonas, him bein' busy som'ers else; see?"

"Thank you, Wells. May I ask one thing more?"

"You can try me."

"Have you any idea who sent that letter to the sheriff?"

"Look a here! This is the way it 'pears to me. Somehow, Wiggins gits that button—he sees his chance, an' goes, *first*, to Mrs. Deering—"

"How do you know that?"

"Guessed it, quick's I found that button. Well—he don't jest succeed there, so he goes and sends a letter to the sheriff so's to git even, see? Next, he's goin' to try *you*, an' as I've 'bout said my say, I'm goin' to give him a chance."

But few more words passed between them, and then Tom Wells went away, Deering walking beside him to the stairhead, as if with a departing friend or guest, and shaking his hand warmly there.

The visit of Jonas Wiggins was not so prolonged.

Having waited with burning impatience for the departure of Tom Wells, Jonas lost no time in climbing the stairs, and applying, in his turn, for an audience with "that young Deering," as he usually styled Bruce.

The door opened promptly to his knock, and his reception caused him some misgiving.

"Mr. Wiggins!" spoke his host with mock politeness, "it pleases me to see you. Walk in, sir," for Jonas, somewhat discomposed, had halted on the threshold. He had meant to enter boldly, was even prepared to force his way into the presence of Bruce Deering, if need be; but this welcome,—and the peculiar tone in which it was uttered—it was very disconcerting.

Meantime, Bruce Deering, closing the door, had turned toward him, and was deliberately scanning him from head to foot.

"If your business with me is not *too* urgent, Mr. Wiggins," remarked Bruce, "I would like to ask you, before we go into anything else, one question. Where did you obtain a certain button which you attempted to dispose of yesterday to a lady friend of mine?"

Wiggins could bluster and browbeat, and he could argue in a manner—with Jane, but he dared not bluster here, neither could he browbeat; as for argument, he was by no means a fool, and he knew better than to attempt to parry or argue with this clever young lawyer; besides, already he had lost his temper. At first he was tempted to defiance, first that and then accusation and threats; but he was by no means devoid of a certain amount of coarse shrewdness, and this, after a moment—during which he ground his teeth in wrathful silence, and Bruce stood before him simply waiting—helped him to a reply.

"I'll tell ye where I percured that button with *your 'nitials* on to it, if you want to know! I found it *layin' right closte by the body of Joe Matchin* when we all come in an' found him a layin' dead."

Deering moved back a step; his face was set like a mask.

"And why," he asked, "did you take it to a *lady*, who could have no concern in it?"

"I'll tell ye *that*, too! Because I knew that it lay between *you* and *her—which one* lost the thing the night of the murder; and, if 'twas *hers*, why, I judged she'd want it back, and less said the better."

"That will do. Now, Jonas Wiggins, listen to me. I know you and your schemes. I know all that you are capable of; and I have just this to say: if you approach Mrs. Deering again, *in any way*—in person, by letter, or by messenger—if you take that lady's name upon your polluted tongue, write another anonymous letter, or try *in any way* to set in motion a word concerning her, I will take it upon myself to punish you so thoroughly, so effectually, and so publicly, that you will regret, all your days, having ever meddled with my affairs, or insulted my friends!" He stood above the other, taller by a head, an athlete, as opposed to the squat, stoop-shouldered creature before him; and he held out one muscular arm in suggestive menace. "For myself, I should disdain to touch you, tell your lies, and do your dirty work as you might, or dared; but remember this, by your very effort to blacken another you have invited suspicion to turn her gaze upon *your*self, and now go; and remember that all you say, and all you do, will be known! There is an eye upon you that you cannot escape! Not a word. If you open your mouth again in my hearing I will throw you downstairs!"

He flung the door open and motioned his visitor toward it.

At the threshold Jonas turned toward him a face full of malignant menace and baffled hate, but the sudden forward stride and the gleam from a flashing eye was enough, even without the suggestive clinching of the strong hand, and Mr. Wiggins went hastily downstairs, trembling with rage.

Sometimes it happens that a greater trouble reconciles us to lesser evils; and when Jonas and Jane met, and told, each as was deemed best, the story of their mutually bootless afternoon's adventures, the old feud was swallowed up in the new disappointment.

When each tale was told, Jane arose in her might and demonstrated her ability as a leader, and her right to be, what she undoubtedly was for the most part, the head of the family.

"We ain't beat yet, Jone Wiggins, though you did make a awful blunder when you berried that button. Come now, let's have sometir'n ter eat, an' then we'll set down agin an' talk things over. I've got another idee."

They talked long and late, and when Jane had fully and fairly aired her "idee," Jonas began to lift up his head again. "Jiminy!" he exclaimed, "it's a pretty brash thing ter try on, but *we'll do it.* I'll beat that feller yit!"

Urged on by malice and disappointed cupidity, they had determined to come boldly out as "witnesses for the prosecution," and to apply to

Mr. Baird for a chance to lay important testimony in the hands of the detective, who, all Pomfret felt assured was somewhere invisibly overlooking, perhaps shaping, the fate of Bruce Deering.

CHAPTER XXI.

A STRANGE LETTER.

DETECTIVE MURTAGH was absent four days, during which time Mr. Baird and his friends were anxious and watchful to no purpose.

On the evening of the day of his visit to Bruce Deering—the second day of the detective's absence—Tom Wells presented himself before Mr. Baird. This ranger of the woods had called, he said, to inform Mr. Baird that he need feel no more anxiety concerning Jonas Wiggins.

"There ain't any danger of *his* troubling Mr. Deering for some days or so," he said with a significant grin. "He don't want to see much of anybody, Wiggins don't, not right now. I wish't I could tell ye more, Mr. Baird; but mum's the word as was passed to me." He broke into a short laugh. "This is a sort of queer case all round, and it 'pears to me jest now that *I've* got my full share of bosses!"

The banker smiled. He had full confidence in Wells, and felt quite content to get his own ideas, sifted and arranged, through Murtagh.

"You must not count me as one of the 'bosses,' Wells," he replied. "Your instructions, such as they were, came *through* me only, and *from* the officer who has charge of this case. I believe he intends soon to hold a personal interview with you, and that will mean that we count you one of us, and a true friend to Bruce Deering."

"I'm a friend to Bruce Deering, fast enough," said Wells, gravely, "and I tell ye, Mr. Baird, that feller's goin' to need all his friends before he gits through! Things are cuttin' pretty closte; but—*there!* I don't deny but what I might have somethin' to say to your detective, when he sees fit to give me the chance. I ain't goin' to say anything more, though, till that time." He paused here, but mentally finished his sentence thus, "I don't engage to tell *him* all I know, neither."

On the morning of the fifth day of his absence, Murtagh reappeared, and his story of the past four days was even more incomplete than was the report of Tom Wells.

"I thought I'd struck a sort of trail," he explained, "and I don't think my time was quite thrown away; but, I've come back a good deal—mystified, in spite of the little point I've made out. And, just for the present, that's about all I can say. You see, Mr. Baird, if we miners into mystery were to tell everything, as it first comes to us, before it's been looked into, sifted, and sort of assayed, we'd do a good deal more harm than good ofttimes, and make free and needless use of names best let alone."

"I understand," Mr. Baird broke in; and, as in the case of Tom Wells, he assured Murtagh of his confidence and his entire willingness to wait, adding, "but I *would* like to ask one thing."

"What is it?"

"Have your discoveries added anything to the case *against* Bruce Deering?"

"Not a feather's weight!" declared Murtagh. "Nothing either for or against!"

"Humph! And yet you say you have made some strange discoveries?"

"We won't put it in the plural *yet*. You don't want to forget, that, granting that Deering is innocent, there *must* be *someone else* guilty. There!" putting out his hand as if to interrupt the question almost visible on the other's lip, "*I've done.*"

. . . . . .

Beechwood was a very quiet house during the few days following upon Jonas Wiggin's hostile demonstration. Brenda was the same dainty, tender, thoughtful wife that she had ever been to Lysander Deering; a shade less cheery than of old, but this same shade brooded over all Beechwood. Valentine was fitful, capricious, cold, the servants thought and said, and they missed her cheery words and kindly, thoughtful ways. As for the master and mistress, her beloved guardian and dearest friend, it soon became manifest to them both that Valentine shunned them whenever she could. When they were together, all three, in drawing-room or library, in the carriage or on the lawn, she was always a willing and prompt third; but she avoided society *à deux*, and always found a way to evade a *tête-à-tête*.

As for Lysander Deering, while always kindly and thoughtful for others, he was not the smiling and social master and friend of days before. He was given to long grave lapses into thought, and he spent much time alone in his library, sometimes writing, sometimes overlooking letters, papers, and books of memoranda. At such times his door was closed, and Brenda was the only one who ventured to open it; and even to her he did not make known the nature of, or reason for, his search—for this it seemed to be—among old documents and letters. This was why he had been so utterly oblivious to the two visits of the Wigginses man and wife. This, too, was why, when one day, in response to a light tap at his door, he looked up and said "Come in," he had uttered a sharp exclamation of surprise, when, instead of his wife's fair face, he encountered the doubtful gaze of Sarita, who hesitated, yet came forward, and laid upon the table beside him a couple of small, folded, and somewhat crumpled documents. They looked like letters rather pocket worn, and without their envelopes.

"What is this, Sarita?" he asked carelessly.

"I hardly know, sir. I found them upon the floor of the room Mr. Bruce Deering occupied a few nights ago; I was helping Mrs. Merton overlook the sleeping-rooms and—"

"The 'room he *occupied!*' Did not Mr. Bruce 'occupy' his old room—next that of Brook?"

"*Oui—yes*, sir!"

"Then why not *say* in Mr. Bruce's room? It *is* his room as much as ever, and if these were found there, why not have left them upon his table until he comes again?"

His tone was almost impatient. He was sensitive for Bruce Deering

and fancied that the woman's tone in speaking his nephew's name was not precisely what it would have been a month earlier.

She hesitated a moment, then came a step nearer, speaking low:

"Because, sir—I hope it was not wrong—I saw that there had been some letters burned in the grate, and *these* had fallen just inside. I—I fancied it might be something to be returned to Mr. Bruce,—at least *not* to be left—as you said."

"Umph! Very well, Sarita, since you have removed them from the room, I suppose they may as well remain here until Mr. Bruce comes again." And he turned again to the papers at his side.

Several times he glanced at the two folded papers lying close beside the others as Sarita had left them, and, after a time, he pushed his work aside and took one of them in his hand. What the woman had said about the burnt paper had annoyed him; not because of the burning, but because it had been noted by one of the servants, just at this particular time, when every slightest act of Bruce Deering's would be noted and—probably—fitted to a meaning. He had no thought of reading the paper he held in his hand, only to assure himself that it was of value, not merely waste paper cast aside; but as he shook open the thin sheet, a single glance was enough to cause him to start and almost drop the paper: he had recognised the handwriting, read a name—the name of *Joe Matchin*!

He laid the letter down quickly, as if it had burned him, and taking up the other sheet, which was the same in size and kind, placed it with the first. His face was pale, his hand unsteady; and yet he had seen so little; just some familiar writing and a name. For a long half-hour he sat with his face bent upon his hand, then he lifted his head and looked about him.

"I must know more now," he said to himself. "It is my right; I will know *all* that I can!" He got up and went slowly to the door, which he locked. "*She* must not see me," he thought, "until I am calmer than this." And he went back to his place and took up the paper which, as yet, he had not opened. It was the last half of a letter, the writing the same as that of the other, and he threw it down with a sigh.

"It's nothing," he breathed, "nothing for or against."

He took up the other, and as he read, his face paled again. "Great heavens!" he groaned, "in any hands but mine this would be *damning!*" Again he sat and thought, while the minutes rolled away; then he turned to his desk with sudden nervous energy. "I must know the worst!" he assured himself. "I can never rest until I do! And I—yes, *I shall take his word!*"

Then, with rapid pen, he wrote a note to Bruce Deering, rang the bell and gave an imperative order. "Tell Hall to take the trap," he said, "and go at once to Mr. Bruce Deering's with this note. If Mr. Deering is disengaged he is to bring him back in the trap. Tell him to drive the Morgan and to lose no time."

When the door had closed behind the servant he caught up the pen again. "I may as well write it now," he muttered, "even if it is not sent. I can't sit idle and wait." And this is what he wrote to Mr. Baird:—

"My Friend Baird,—If your detective is within reach, will you prevail upon him to give me a short interview, *here* if it is possible, and the sooner the better. I want to hear his views upon the situation. Answer.—Yours, Deering."

"Pshaw!" he ejaculated as he folded and enclosed this. "I may as well send them *both* by Jerry;" and again he rang the bell.

It was early in the day for fashionable callers, but as Jerry Hall drove out from the Beechwood gates scarce ten minutes later, he passed Miss Wardell's pony carriage, just turning in.

Contrary to her usual custom, she did not ask for Mrs. Deering or "for the ladies," but sent her name to Miss Rodney, and added, as the servant was about to leave the room, "Please say to Miss Rodney that I hope she can see me for a few moments, *at least.*" She had been told by the girl that Valentine had kept her room "with a headache" since breakfast.

When Valentine received this message, a little frown gathered between her brows, and she hesitated for just a moment, then glanced at herself in the mirror, and opened her door to go below. As she stepped out into the wide hall, she heard a door close farther down, and paused a moment; Brenda was just coming away from the housekeeper's room, near the foot of the hall.

They met almost at the head of the stairway, and Valentine put out her hand.

"Come down with me, Brenda," she said, so anxiously that the other knew at once that she was asking for a personal favour; "Miss Wardell is in the morning-room."

Brenda looked down at the little hand upon her arm. "Has she asked for *me?*" she questioned.

"No matter! She sent no card, only a verbal announcement. Brenda, I *really* wish it!" Their eyes met for just a moment, then Brenda tucked the dainty hand beneath her arm, and together they went down to the morning-room.

There was just the faintest shade upon the face of Ora Wardell as she arose to meet them, and the smile upon her face was not so brilliant as usual, but she greeted them very prettily, and assured them that she felt herself to be "exceedingly fortunate" in being able to see them both at such an unconventionally early hour for callers, and at a time when they themselves had so lately arrived; and she inquired with much interest about their sojourn in New York and Mr. Deering's health, ending with a housewifely inquiry regarding the condition of things of the household.

"Do you know," she declared, "I can never go away, even for a *short* time, and come home to find all things just as they should be; and I have wondered if *you* have been compelled to rearrange and pull to pieces because of the carelessness or indifference of servants, especially as I chanced to hear from Sarita, whom I met upon the road one day, that your housekeeper had been taking a holiday as well as yourselves. Do you know," here she addressed herself to Brenda, "I was *obliged* to go away *quite* hurriedly. Of course Miss Rodney has told you how heartlessly I turned her out? It was a telegram, you see, from Cousin Mary Dunne; really, you know she is mamma's second cousin, but she is old, and almost without relatives,

and I *could* not refuse to go. I was gone just four days and a half, and I *wish* you could have seen my house, just because they did not expect me so soon. But, oh dear! *you* are a perfect house mistress, Mrs. Deering, and I—" she pressed her gloved hands together in a dramatic gesture, "and *I* am just the reverse!" She turned with a bright smile toward Valentine and stopped short, as if suddenly reminded of something serious.

"Miss Rodney! I was very near forgetting my errand to *you*." She glanced from one to the other and drew from a little chatelaine a letter in a torn envelope. "Somehow," she began again, "things have been going wrong with me of late, both little and great. There was my sudden call to second Cousin Mary, first, by which, second—*Second* with a *big S*—Miss Rodney, I was compelled to lose *your* company, which, really, is very hard to get. Then, coming home, I find my favourite Limoges vase in atoms, the chimes of my little Swiss clock gone wrong, and, sadder still than that, something gone wrong with the big new organ of St. Mark's; a leak in the bellows, it seems to be. You know I have been playing upon it often, almost daily, in fact, for some time; and now I must give that up until a man can be got from the city, and no one knows how soon that will be. But there!—I have wandered from my subject again. Miss Rodney, here is something else gone wrong; but *this* mischief is none of my making; indeed, how do I know that we are not fellow-sufferers?" She glanced down at the letter in her hand, then shot across to Valentine a look of arch significance. "Miss Rodney, *have* you anything in your possession which *belongs* or *should* belong to *me?*"

Valentine's brows were lifted, her face was gravely inquiring.

"I am not aware of any such possession," she said, a touch of coldness in her voice. "I think you will have to explain, if I am to have more light."

"I daresay that is best; I suppose you have no secrets from Mrs. Deering, so that I may go on, without fear of betraying your correspondents?" smiling from one to the other until the white teeth gleamed between the parted red lips.

"You are safe to go on," returned Valentine. Then, as Mrs. Deering made a gesture as if to rise, "No, Brenda, we have no secrets here. Miss Wardell, pray go on."

"That is *so* nice! Now then, you may remember that I spoke of meeting Mr. Brook Deering, while abroad, and perhaps I mentioned our occasional correspondence. It was only occasional, and I have not heard from Mr. Deering *this* time since I came home from Europe. So, when I found a letter upon my desk last evening, upon my return, and saw upon the envelope Mr. Deering's writing, I opened it in expectation of hearing some news from abroad. *Imagine* my surprise when I saw myself, as I supposed, addressed as '*Cousin*,' and my embarrassment, when I found, before I had read half-a-dozen lines, that the letter was not *mine* but *yours*. Yes, I assure you, it was *addressed* to *me*, in due form, outside, but the contents were, and *are* yours." She tore away the already mutilated envelope, and rising, held out the letter to Valentine, and then, seeing that the latter hesitated, dropped it, with a playful obeisance, upon her lap.

"It's yours," Miss Wardell insisted; "yours entirely. And of course my natural inference was that, in the haste of departure, he had written two letters, one to you and one to myself, and had mixed them, so that yours came to *me*, and, as I had *imagined*, mine came to you. It was posted at Havre—"

"Ah!" ejaculated Brenda, "at Havre!" and she turned toward Valentine a significant look.

"I begin to understand," said Valentine calmly, and answering Brenda's look with a shadowy smile, while she took the letter up and began to smooth out its pages. "Sarita brought me a letter, or the fragments of one, which came several days ago; Cappie, my dog, had got it, in some way, and had torn it in bits. I could see that it was written by Cousin Brook, and that was all; except for some few words which may have meant some allusion to his return home."

"Yes. No doubt. He *is* coming home, I—I read *your* letter so far as that. But not *farther*, I assure you; the next sentence showed me that I was transgressing, for it began with your name."

If Valentine had at first thought of opening the sheet, or reading the letter, she changed her intention, and let the document fall again into her lap, while she languidly explained that the mutilated letter, being absolutely of no more value than so much waste paper, had been consigned first to the wastebasket, and then to the flames. 'It was posted from Havre, and the words 'coming,' and 'home,' were the only words that could by any stretch of imagination be thought to have any connection. I wondered a little at the letter," Valentine concluded, "for Brook and I have not corresponded of late."

Miss Wardell did not prolong her call, nor did she press Valentine for a renewal of her interrupted visit, and, when she had driven from the door, Brenda turned back from the window, where she had witnessed the departure, and nodded an adieu, saying,

"Miss Wardell is not looking her best; a little weariness or pallor shows so cruelly upon those rich brunettes. I could almost fancy she has something to worry about."

"Well! has she not?" replied Val; "there is her Limoges vase, her Swiss clock, and the leak in the organ." She had already unfolded the letter, and now began its perusal, seeing which Brenda turned to go.

"Wait, please," Valentine said, still reading; and, a moment later, "I want *you* to read this; it's brief, and contains no secrets."

Brook Deering's letter ran as follows:—

"My Fair Cousin,—I know you will wonder why, after so long a silence, I have ventured to address you; since we mutually decided *not* to correspond. But you were ever ready to do an unlucky wight any kindness in your power, and within reason, and this is to tax your kindness a little. For the past three months I have had some vague thoughts of coming home, sometime sooner or later; but had never made a definite resolve until, some two weeks ago, I met in Paris a certain Mr. Markham, whom you may remember as the New York cousin of John Redding. He, Markham, tells me that he spent a few days in Pomfret just before sailing—he had only just arrived—and judge of my surprise *and alarm*, when he told me that the dear *padre* was so ill that he had been ordered to New York by his home physician, Doctor Liscom, of course, to get the benefit of New York medical skill. Cousin Valentine, *why* have I not heard more of this? or heard it sooner? Perhaps it is my own fault; I have been running about so much; but I have heard from Bruce quite regularly, and from Mamma Brenda now and then. But to think of my father *ill*, so ill that he must go away for medical aid, and *I* here pleasuring! The news has spoiled Europe for me, and I am

coming home; so now I write you just to ask if you will (ah, I know you will) let it be known to the dear old boy, and to Mamma B—— in some careless, simple way, that I am tired of Europe and want to see you all, and that I am coming home—soon. This will pave the way for my speedy arrival and it will not surprise our dear invalid *too much*. Great Heavens! When I think that—but for this encounter with Markham, I might have loitered here, perhaps all the summer, while that best of fathers—father and mother in one—may be—God knows I *hope* not—slowly drifting away from his good-for-nought but loving boy. There, Coz., I had not meant to be so sentimental; give my love to father, to Mamma Brenda, and dear old Bruce, and accept for yourself as much as you *will* of the same, from your home-coming cousin.—B.D."

"*P.S.—Coming on the Siren.*"

Brenda smiled as she laid this letter down.

"How like him that sounds. As impulsive and as boyish as ever. I am glad he is coming! His father will be so pleased! I must tell him at once. But—*I* wrote him, weeks ago, telling him that his father was not in his usual health, and that I was anxious upon his account."

"Brook has been travelling so much, he may have missed some letters."

"True," assented Brenda, with a hand upon the door. "I am going to look at the papers to see when the *Siren* will be due, and then I shall tell his father."

Left alone, Valentine began to pace slowly across the room, at the side nearest the window facing the highway. Far down, almost out of sight, she could see Ora Wardell's phaeton rolling leisurely townwards, and, as she noted it, her lip curled in a scornful smile.

"Unless I am much mistaken—Miss Wardell," she meditated, "there is no one here at Beechwood who will look forward to Brook Deering's return with such eagerness, such impatience, as will *you*, Miss Wardell! No one—no one!"

. . . . . .

It seemed a long, long hour to the impatient man in the library, who sat, and stood, and walked, and lounged while waiting the reply to his message, and could confine his attention to nothing save the bit of road which could be seen through the shrubbery from the big south window of the room. In fact, it was little more than half-an-hour before Jerry Hall drove in at the south gate and set his passenger down at the side entrance, which led, by way of a *porte cochère* and a square hall, directly to one of the three doors which opened upon the library.

As Bruce Deering came into his uncle's presence—tall, erect, and grave of countenance—the elder man moved toward him, with hasty, almost unsteady, step, and with outstretched, trembling hand.

"Bruce," he began with feverish haste, and in a voice which could not be kept steady, "I am glad you came—came at once! I don't think I *could* have endured another such hour of suspense. I—I am an old man after all. And illness has taken away my will, my self-control— Bruce—you have been like an own son to me! My only brother's only son! Been as near to me, just as near, as—as my other—own boy!" He turned and dropped weakly into the chair nearest him. "Bruce, listen! I want you to promise to *swear* that you will reply to the questions I am going to put to you, truly!—as truly as you will have to answer at the judgment bar. And—wait!—"

—for the young man seemed about to interrupt him—"on my part *I* promise, just as sacredly, to keep secret, if necessary, the answers you may give until I, too, shall answer at that bar."

"Uncle Lys," began Bruce, "I see clearly that something of a grave nature has occurred. If it concerns *me*, waste no words upon it. Question me, if you will! My every answer shall be truthful—so help me God! In anything that concerns only myself, I acknowledge your *right* to question me as you will. All I ask is, that my answers be enough! That you will not doubt me!"

"I will not doubt you, boy." He opened a drawer in the desk at his side, and with nervous hand drew from it two papers; letters they seemed to be, and each was folded so that only half-a-dozen lines of the writing was visible. Laying these upon the desk before him, and placing a finger upon each, he said, "Look at these two letters and tell me if you recognise the writing of *both*." His voice was husky, and, as Bruce bent over the two documents, he turned away his face. There was silence in the room for a long moment, then Bruce drew back.

"I know the writing," he said, quietly.

"Of *both?*"

"Of both!"

The old man took up one of the letters, spread it open, and drew back, with a gesture toward it. "Read that," he directed.

Bruce Deering took the letter, read the first few lines, and started, while the man in the chair before him sat leaning forward, and watching his face so intently, so eagerly, that his own breath seemed almost to be suspended; now the reader's eyes have travelled half way down the page, and the watcher sees the strong white hands clench themselves upon the paper; then the blood fades slowly out of the face, and the eyes are lifted from the sheet, first doubting, then dazed. Then they go back, and slowly, slowly, the whole face settles into hard, strong lines; the mouth is set; the eyes are fixed, and gleam out dangerously from the face, now colourless to the lips. Now he has read it to the end, and the looker-on breathes a long, quivering sigh, and seems about to speak; but Bruce Deering lifts a restraining hand, and, beginning again, reads the letter a second time, very—very slowly, as if weighing every word; then, with the movement of an automaton, he replaces it upon the table, just where it had been before.

"May I put just one question?" he asks, in a low monotone.

Lysander Deering's face had grown more calm, and the voice was almost firm in which he answered,

"Ask—if possible, I'll answer."

"How came you by that letter?"

"I'll tell you, willingly. It was found—by—by one of the servants, *in your room.*"

"Found! How found?"

"Just within the grate, where, apparently, you—someone, had been burning papers."

"*Someone!* Has anyone occupied that room?"

"Only yourself."

Bruce Deering bent his head, and seemed to meditate. When he

at last looked up, his face was still white, but composed and almost expressionless.

"Will you put your questions?" he asked.

"Yes. Since we *must*, let us have this over! Did you mean to burn that letter?"

"No."

"Did you *lose* it?"

"No."

"Is the statement made in that letter true?"

"There is no statement. Something is taken for granted, and upon that something the rest is founded."

"And the thing that is taken for granted?"

Bruce took up the paper with a steady hand, and, in a firm voice, began to read.

"*Long before I left I was convinced that Matchin suspected you, more than suspected you. And the* GIRL *is likely to reappear at any time; between them you are not safe for a moment. Your best—your only chance, it seems to me, would be to see Matchin and* SILENCE HIM *by appeal, bribery, or in any way you best can.*" He looked up. "This, you see," he said quietly, "presupposes all the rest."

"Presupposes *what? just* WHAT?"

"First, and directly—I am speaking as a lawyer, Uncle Deering—it presupposes—presuming it *as written to me*—it presupposes a guilty knowledge of the disappearance of Rose Matchin; and, by implication, if used as a piece of circumstantial evidence, guilty participation in that last scene of poor Matchin's life, whatever it may have been, at the bank, on the night of his death."

The old man arose. "Bruce, I have only two more questions. First, do you know *how* this half sheet of paper came in your room, and in the grate?"

"*No.*"

"Ah-h! Then *did you ever see it until to-day?*"

No living face could ever be paler than the face of Bruce Deering. But he held himself proudly erect, and met the eyes of his questioner with a look in his own in which the other recognised a fixed purpose.

"Once and for *all*, uncle, *I refuse to answer.*"

"You *have* answered," cried the other, and caught up the mysterious paper. "What shall be done with this?" he queried. "Shall it *burn?*"

"Will you give it to me?"

"I would rather burn it."

"No, I beg of you!" He held out his hand, and his uncle thrust the paper into it, and sank back in his chair, thick drops of perspiration standing out upon his forehead. Both men were silent for a moment, then the elder uttered a long-drawn sigh.

"There is a mystery here," he said gravely, "and something tells me that it is not for *me* to burrow into it. I seem bidden to keep my hands off. Bruce, my boy, there is much more than as yet has even been guessed at; and—this may astonish you—but, tell me if it were possible, if in some manner this whole business could be dropped, could be made to fade by degrees into the long line of unfathomed mysteries, 'failures of justice,' would YOU be content to have it so?"

For a moment the younger Deering sat silent, and visibly wrestling with some strong emotion, then he said slowly,

"Content! No! Not *that*. But willing, yes—I—would be—willing."

"Then—so will I! And if money, or influence, or *finesse* can bring it about, this horrible search shall be dropped." He held out his hand. "Take it, my boy; remember that your word, for *me*, is enough. God!" flinging out the released hands in sudden passion, "that this thing must be! It has undone for me the work of long weeks. It has shortened my life! I feel it! There, boy. Let us be, as much as we can, as if it had *never been*. If *possible*, let us *never speak of it again*."

CHAPTER XXII.

MURTAGH AT WORK.

DETECTIVE MURTAGH had a long talk with Tom Wells on the day after his return to Pomfret. He had been assured by Mr. Baird, and had satisfied himself otherwise, that Wells was a man to be trusted; in fact, he confided to the banker, after his interview with the big huntsman, that, if there was a fault to be found in Wells, it was that he did not say enough.

"There's something left out," the detective affirmed with conviction. "I don't mean that he didn't report Wiggins and his doings in full, but he was too careful when it came to other names: for instance, while he made it clear to me that he was a friend to Mr. Bruce Deering, and a believer in his innocence, he avoided his name so pointedly that I'm forced to the conclusion that he could tell me more about Deering if he would."

This was quite true. Wells had detailed all of Wiggins' manœuvres from his visit to Beechwood up to the next day's call upon Bruce Deering. And he did not omit the burial of the button.

"I follered the feller," he had said, "until I see him begin to poke round under a big oak tree, an', first thing I knew, he took somethin' out of his pocket, all wrapped up in a dirty handkerchief, an' I swan, if he didn't jest up an' bury it right there."

"I suppose," Murtagh had ventured, "you don't know what it was that he buried?"

"I *was* tempted ter dig it up," had been the answer, "but I didn't want ter git into no trouble. I can go right to the spot where it is buried, though."

And the detective had smiled, and said:

"I'm told that Wiggins wants to talk with me, and I fancy he'll tell before I've done with him anything that you have not made quite clear."

Whereupon the two pair of shrewd eyes met, and both smiled broadly.

That same night, shortly after sundown, and while dusk was beginning her vague approach, Jonas Wiggins arose from his late

"supper," and walked to the window. He had been lounging at home since early noonday, awaiting a visit from "that city detective," who, Mr. Baird had assured him, would prefer to seek him in his own home, and would do so within the limits of the day. As Jonas gazed anxiously out, his ear caught the beat of slow falling hoofs, and in a moment, a tall horse, with piebald face and two very distinct white stockings upon its fore feet, halted beside the rickety fence, and a wiry and brisk-moving personage sprang from the saddle, tied the animal short and secure, and came straight toward the house. He was dressed in a rather loud suit of plaids, sported a glittering watch chain, looped across his chest, and carried a heavy hunting-crop, jauntily, in a yellow-gloved hand. A soft felt hat sat rakishly atop, and well back, upon a bushy head of light hair, and a big moustache drooped in long points below his chin, while pale, over-hanging eyebrows accentuated the tinge of a very florid face.

"Mr. Jonas Wiggins, I take it," he began in a brisk, abrupt fashion, as Jonas made haste to meet him upon the door-stone; and the latter having nodded, he went on, "Just clap on your hat and come out a bit, Wiggins; guess we've got a few words to say to each other."

He put a gloved hand upon the shoulder of the somewhat astonished Jonas, who, somehow, felt uncomfortably taken possession of, and, without in the least heeding Jane, who had made herself both visible and audible in the doorway, he escorted his host across the road to a spot where, at the edge of the timber, a fallen tree afforded a seat at a safe distance from the cottage, and where no one could approach within hearing distance from other directions without being seen.

"This is a good place for a confab," declared the new-comer; "I've noted it when I've been this way, sort of looking to see how you was fixed down here." Jonas started. "Oh, you needn't jump! It's my business to look after people, you know; now, I've got to ride back to your county seat with that livery nag, and we must get down to business. You know who I am; and I know you; know you *better than you think*. 'Twould surprise you to hear how *much* I *do* know about you—first and last; but just now, I'm interested in this murder business, and *you* seem to be likewise—a little."

Now Murtagh, at first, had declared that he would not hold a personal interview with Jonas Wiggins; and he had planned to have Mr. Baird receive the fellow, and "get his story out of him," as Murtagh felt sure that he could, while *he*, concealed in the library, where the interview was to have occurred, should hear and see, himself unseen. But *then* he had not heard the experience of Tom Wells.

"After all I *will* talk with this fellow," he had said to the banker, "and what Wells didn't tell me *he* shall. But he must not guess that I am so handy. You may tell Wiggins, or, better, read him an extract from a note, which will tell you that I'll ride over from Saybrook sometime this afternoon. Then I'll fix me up a horse and rig myself, going through the timber, and come around to the shanty about dusk. He will grab at the notion that I keep headquarters at the county seat, see?" and Mr. Baird thought that he did, and carried out his part of the programme with ease and dispatch.

From the first Murtagh had given some study to the personage now

sitting near him, with a look half-curious, half-apprehensive upon his face, and he now turned upon him sharply, aggressively:

"Wiggins, I've been told that you have something to say to me. Now, I've very little time to give you just now, there's too much business in hand, and I've another appointment at the court-house to-night. But—you know what my business is in these parts, and, if you've anything to say or *show* that'll help me to clinch this matter for Mr. Bruce Deering, why, out with it. I'm *here* to listen."

Wiggins started, and his countenance brightened. The rough, bluff, authoritative manner of the detective disarmed any suspicion he might have felt.

"Then YOU think he's the feller?" he exclaimed, eagerly.

"Umph! things look that way. If I didn't have some reason for it I wouldn't be likely to be hunting proof against him. But come, go on with your talk, time's passing."

Wiggins had studied his part, and he now began with the tale of the finding of the cuff button. He described it minutely, dwelling upon the point of the initials, and added, "Now, I don't want to hurt nobody, but I couldn't help but see that I must a picked up that sleeve button right on the very spot where Bruce Deerin', 'cordin' to his own account, must have passed when he run out o' the bank."

"Well, go on!"

Jonas hesitated.

"What did you do with the button, and why didn't you produce it at the inquest?"

"Wal, I felt kind of queer about it, ye see—" leering up into the detective's face, "*them initials*—they was Bruce Deerin's, all right—but—they was *somebody else's too.*"

"They were. Whose?"

"*Mrs.* Deerin's. The old man's young gal wife. Mrs. Brenda D——"

"Oh!" Murtagh was growing impatient. "And so you went, like a good fellow, and offered to restore the amethyst to the lady if she could prove her property, eh? Oh, you needn't jump, Jonas! I know pretty much what's going on about Pomfret, and there's more than *one* detective about. What did the lady say? Didn't claim it? Of course not. And then you went and tried it on Bruce Deering, Esq., eh? And you couldn't deal with *him* somehow, and so you went and *buried* the thing. You see I'm posted. Now, look here, Jonas," suddenly changing his tone to one of conciliation, and his look to one at once confidential and cunning, "let's get right down to business! You and me, and most of us in this country, are working for *money;*" he drew out a plethoric pocket-book and slapped it down upon his knee; "business is business! Money talks! You just swear to keep all this mum, and to go away as quick as it's safe, clear out of this part of the country, and I'll give you just *five thousand dollars down for that cuff button* right here in my hand."

Jonas glared at his tempter, and fairly writhed. Not for a moment did he doubt the sincerity of all this, and the thought that he had been cheated of such a golden opportunity was maddening. More than once had he searched the woods near the place where he had con-

cealed the button, and, at last, had tried to console himself with the thought that, after all, since neither Bruce nor Brenda Deering would deal with him, he had lost but little, for, after all, the button in itself was not so exceedingly valuable. But now! oh! if he had not tried to cheat Jane! In his rage with himself and fate he got upon his feet, and kicking at the inoffensive log with savage force and spite, he snarled out his disappointment in a defiant—

"An' s'pose I won't *do it*, eh?"

Somehow the detective was on his feet also. The pocket-book had disappeared, and in its place was a very suggestive-looking pistol.

"If you refuse anything I require of you, sir, you'll have good reason for repentance, and plenty of time to repent in! Sit down there! I've just brought this out to convince you that I mean business, and you had better! And now that our little farce is over, we'll begin in earnest. You'd best answer my questions truthfully. If you lie I shall know it. There, you need not argue; I don't suppose you've thought of *me* during the last few days; but I've had *you* on my mind, and I made a little trip to the city partly on your account. I've seen your phiz *in the rogues' gallery, and I've got your record.* LOOK OUT!"

The sun had set, and the dusk was heavy all about them; emboldened by this, and rendered reckless by rage and fear, Wiggins had thrust his hand behind him in a gesture too significant to be mistaken. The pistol was still in Murtagh's right hand, and the hunting-crop, since the beginning of the interview, had rested against his left knee. With the last words he had caught up this, and, before the menacing hand could be withdrawn, had dealt a blow upon the arm which caused it to drop, and its owner to utter a stifled howl of pain, terminating in a string of curses.

"Understand me, Jonas Wiggins!" said the detective sternly, "I have no time for trifling. I am here to get the truth out of you, and the truth I am going to have, or you'll find yourself in worse hands than *mine.*"

But Wiggins, for the time, was conquered, and became as wax in the hands of his inquisitor.

. . . . . .

An hour later, Murtagh, taking a circuitous route, found himself in a little sheltering clump of young trees and bush just outside the town, and near the foot of a street which would lead him straight to the alley upon which stood Banker Baird's stables. It was behind this leafy screen, one of the outposts of the timber belt, that he had effected the metamorphosis of himself and Mr. Baird's hack, which we have seen; and here he halted now, and after removing his wig and otherwise transforming himself again into "Mr. Baird's new man," he began, with a coarse sponge and vigorous rubbing, to remove the chalk stockings and the white forehead, which had so changed the appearance of good Brown Bess. His face was sombre, and he worked with haste, pondering the while.

As he approached the mouth of the alley, he espied a tall figure lounging lazily townward, and at once a signal was exchanged.

Before Bess was in her stall, Tom Wells had entered the stable by way of the alley.

"Go right up to my loft, Wells," Murtagh said; "I'll reconnoitre a bit, and then be with you."

"Now, Wells," he began, when the two were at last together in Murtagh's "den," "let us sum up. I've seen Wiggins, and I've got the whole story out of him. He thinks you dug up the button, and I *know* you did. So come now, tell me all about it, and why you visited Mr. Bruce Deering so soon after your discovery?" The detective knew his man, or thought he did, and spoke with him upon equal terms as man to man. But the answer surprised him nevertheless.

Wells got upon his feet, and gazed down at him, with a face at once grave and kindly.

"Cap'n," he began, "I'd do anything to oblige ye that I could do, honestly, and without hurtin' anybody else; and, since you've as good as found it out, anyhow, I'll own that I *did* dig up that plague-nationed button, and that I buried it again. And—yes, I went to see Mr. Bruce Deering; and *thar's an end!* That's *all* I kin tell ye; what I said to Mr. Deering, and what he said to me, and what it all come to I can't say; I'm a man of my word, cap'n. An' leavin' this business out, I'm ready to help ye in anythings but—"

"Why! But, Wells, look here—"

"Hold on jest a minit! I s'pose you're goin' to say that if this comes into court, I'll *have* to tell all I know, and I'll *have* to perduce that button. But *I won't!* If I see it's my best lay I'll *destroy* the thing, or otherways git red of it; an' as for tellin', why, I'll sarve my time out for contemptin' court 'ithout a grumble; but I'll *keep my word, sir!*"

Murtagh got up and slapped him upon the shoulder with perfect good-humour.

"So be it, Wells," he said; "it's about what I looked for. But, of course, I've got to make my point, and so—"

"And so what?"

"And so I just needs must go to see Mr. Bruce Deering himself. I tell you what, friend, I begin to feel too well known in Pomfret. I was willing to be known by you, and Mr. Baird, and by the doctor and old Mr. Deering, but I declined to be an open secret to the suspected party; and now you've driven me to it. I tell you, Wells," in a suddenly serious tone, "this case is growing so queer that it's harrowing to study on it! I don't think I ever said it of a case before, but I tell you I'd as lief be out of *this* as not."

. . . . . .

A half hour later, the detective entered the library where Mr. Baird, who had spent the latter half of the day at his farm, had but just seated himself, having despatched his early dinner, ready to attack a little pile of letters that had arrived by the afternoon mail.

"Well, Murtagh," he began, as the other advanced, "am I to hear the news from Wiggins and company at first hand?"

"Not just now, sir. I only wish to disturb you a moment, or, at least, a few of them. I want to pay a short visit to Mr. Bruce Deering, and I wish you could find it convenient to send some sort of a message by me."

"A genuine message, do you mean?"

"No, just a sham. Something that will admit me—a blank envelope will do."

"At once?"

"Almost; but, first," he pulled up a chair and sat down near the banker and exactly facing him, "will you tell me a little more about Miss Wardell?"

Mr. Baird's face was one huge interrogation point.

"Oh, I expected to surprise you," Murtagh added, smiling oddly, "and it's only right that I explain, as much as I can. But I would like to put my questions first."

"Ora Wardell!" ejaculated Mr. Baird, and then he settled back in his armchair. "Go on, then," he said; "of course, I know you must have a good reason."

The detective took a note-book from his pocket and consulted it. Then—"You have told me a few things about Miss Wardell," he began; "who she is, who her father was, and her position and rank in Pomfret. Now, do you know her well enough to be able to tell me anything about her character, her capabilities, her temper or temperament, eh? For instance, from your knowledge of her, would you call her one to rely upon in case she were your friend?"

"That means, I suppose, has she a strong nature?"

"Yes."

"I think she has. I should think that in the case of a true friend, one whom she regarded beyond the ordinary, she could be a *very strong friend* indeed."

"Even in adversity?"

"If the friendship on her part were strong enough—*even* in adversity."

"Do you think—is there a chance, that she might be such a friend to—Bruce Deering?"

Strange as these queries sounded to Mr. Baird, he betrayed no further surprise, but answered the detective as if he were in the witness-box.

"I have no reason to think them more than ordinary neighbourhood friends."

"And Mrs. Deering, were they in the least intimate?"

"No; they exchanged calls and visits, but Mrs. Deering has *no* intimates, in the sense you mean, except in her own home."

"And—in her own home?"

"Brenda Deering and Valentine Rodney, I have already assured you, have been always like sisters."

"You say have been?"

"I mean *are*."

"To return to Miss Wardell. In a town like this, all people, women especially, soon establish for themselves a sort of personality. Of course, the characters which are attached to people by those among whom they live are, nearly always, surface characters. Sometimes a strong personality may be hidden utterly beneath an overlay of habits and manners, which fit more or less well, like our clothes. These are the people who, in emergencies, in some strong crisis, astonish us. Should you think Miss Wardell such an one?"

The witness seemed to consider.

"I see what you mean," he said finally; "and now that you have stirred up my ideas upon a subject which might never otherwise have presented itself to me, I think I may say that, in a crisis, a case demanding action, energy, *finesse*, I think Ora Wardell *might* come out rather strong. Is that what you want?"

"Perfectly—now listen while I recall to your mind a few simple facts; and the first is that of Joe Matchin's murder. Said murder occurs in the bank, and, except for the church, Miss Wardell's house *is nearer the bank* than any other. Now, that house—when I saw how completely the murderer vanished, and how quickly—was, naturally, the first thing to come under my—observation; and I said to myself, if I could find *in that house*, someone who, for any secret reason, was an enemy to Joe Matchin, I could account for the very prompt disappearance of the assassin; for that he—or she—*did* disappear *at once* I am convinced."

"What! Do you think that the murderer was concealed anywhere in *Pomfret?*"

"I think that he *was* and *is*, and *all the time has been* close by. I believe that he was in hiding five minutes after striking the blow, or *else*—he was *never* in hiding at all. I'm not, by any means, in love with your sheriff; he's a brutal fellow, with a natural bloodhound bent, but he has done well! He has made as thorough a search, aided by the citizens, as anyone could have organised out of the same material. No, sir! *I* saw at once that 'twas no use to look for a 'hide out.' But I did not come here to advise with your sheriff, as I understood my instructions; and so he is going on, looking with all his might for something he'll never find; and, all the time, he fully expects that in the end he will have the pleasure of putting Mr. Bruce Deering behind the bars; and that's what this business is coming to, in spite of money and influence, if some new development does not turn his attention elsewhere before the grand jury assembles."

"You think so?"

"I am *sure* of it! and I'm morally convinced that there's a big sensation behind this business for whoever sees the thing cleared up. At present the town is divided, and those who do not think Deering the guilty man, believe it to have been the work of a burglar; but—*it never was!*"

"Then, in Heaven's name, *what was it?*"

"Ah! don't I wish I knew!"

"And how do you reconcile your idea with that stolen money?"

"Oh, *that!* If the little theory I have evolved is right, that was done, in part, at least, for a *blind;* the money may have been acceptable enough, but if the theory I've been trying to work out is the right one, Matchin was killed *because he was dangerous to somebody.*"

"Dangerous?"

"Yes; when I advised you to say nothing to Carton, or others, about the money taken, and the hatchet, it was because I feared it would lead poor Carton even further astray than he is now, and I don't mean to work *against* him, if I don't see fit to come to his aid. But," pushing back his chair, and rising briskly; "to go back to Miss

Wardell: was Matchin ever, at any time, in the family, in any capacity?"

"No."

"But he had been in the service of the bank for years?"

"Yes."

"During which time the Wardells have lived in this same place?" Mr. Baird nodded. "This house is the only inhabited building within Matchin's range of vision, from the bank windows, on two sides; he could see the Wardell place, and a part of the grounds, also a wing of the stables, and the carriage way out to the street. Every day, for years, he has been able to note much that went on at the Wardells. Now—may it not be *possible* that someone under that roof has a secret which Matchin may have found out? Let us even suppose that it is Miss Wardell's secret. Is she, or is she not a woman capable of defending herself, and stopping, let us say, the tongue of a gossip, in the only effectual way?"

Mr. Baird sprang to his feet.

"Good God, man!" he cried, "do you mean to *accuse* Ora Wardell?"

"I mean to *accuse* no one! But, among all whom I have seen since I have been upon this case, Miss Ora Wardell is *the one individual* who has displayed, upon more than one occasion, more interest in Joe Matchin's murder than *I* can see a reason for."

"Then you do suspect her? Man, what reason *can* you have?"

"I suspected from the very first an unusual interest upon her part in the proceedings at the bank; I also suspect that she has some knowledge, or suspicion, concerning the murder; I can tell you nothing more, except this, now, and you may be certain that, until I have *good reason* for so doing, no hint of this suspicion upon my part will go beyond the present limit, between us two. And now—the note to Mr. Deering, if you will."

CHAPTER XXIII.

DISMISSED.

AFTER the departure of the detective, Mr. Baird pondered for a long half-hour, growing more and more perplexed as he recalled Murtagh's words, and mentally reviewed the circumstances and possibilities of the case. Somehow he found himself unable to banish the name of Ora Wardell from his thoughts, and in an effort to do this he at last turned to his letters again. A glance at the envelopes showed him upon one of them the handwriting of Lysander Deering. He read it at once.

"What can he have to say to Murtagh," he muttered uneasily, "that cannot wait until another day?" And after a moment he got up and rang the bell. "Whatever it may be," he thought, "it won't do to keep Deering waiting; the man's in no condition to withstand worry or suspense." He ordered Lady Jane and the light buggy to be in waiting at the door, and then sat down and prepared another note, like the one so lately prepared for Murtagh.

"Another pretext," he said to himself. "I must instruct him to wait for an answer,—yes, and to deliver in person. I don't understand all this—and—I don't *like it.* I wish this Matchin murder case was well ended."

Meantime the detective had found Bruce Deering at home, and just taking leave of John Redding; the two men had been discussing the one topic of paramount interest, and both faces were grave.

Murtagh stood respectfully aside until the visitor was half-way downstairs, and then he stepped briskly within the room, the door of which Bruce still held wide open.

Since their meeting at the bank, previous to the inquest, these two had not met face to face, although Bruce had readily guessed that the man who exercised Mr. Baird's horses, and sometimes drove the banker to and fro, was the detective in disguise, and seeing him now, he quite understood that something of moment to himself had brought Murtagh hither.

"I've no objections, if *you* haven't, to Mr. Deering's knowing who I am," Murtagh had said to Mr. Baird. "But, of course, it won't do for us to meet, or confer together. So long as he stands toward me in the position of a person under suspicion, it wouldn't do. If you want me to prove him innocent, I must go at it precisely as if I were trying to prove him guilty; that is, without his help."

Knowing all this, Bruce met him with grave courtesy, and having proffered a seat, waited for him to take the initiative, which he was prompt to do.

"Mr. Deering," he began, "it was not my intention, as you know, to seek information at your hands, nor should I have done so, if circumstances had not drawn my attention toward another than yourself, in connection with the unfortunate affair of the bank. I am sure you will understand me, and appreciate my position, when I add that, while I cannot explain anything, I am acting solely *in your* interest, when I come to you with certain questions, which for your own sake and for the sake of truth and justice, I hope you will be willing to answer. Need I add that, in so replying, anything *concerning yourself alone*, will be to me as if it had never been said." He paused an instant and then added, "Of course, this interview must be brief. You understand that all which concerns you is noted; and it is important that I avoid suspicion."

"I understand," replied Bruce, half smiling. "Put your questions, then; I will answer, if possible; and truthfully, if at all."

"First, then—it did not occur to anyone to ask this question at the inquest, or after: Knowing what you do of this affair of the man Matchin, his position, and surroundings, is there any man whom you suspect as *in any way* connected with the murder?"

Murtagh had not seated himself, and the two stood scarce two feet apart, face to face, eye meeting eye. Bruce Deering's face never blanched, and his reply came promptly,

"I decline to answer."

"So! Is there, then, any *woman* whom you suspect, *in any way?*"

"No."

"Thank you! Now you have lately received two visitors: one—a

friend—was Tom Wells; the other—a snake in the grass—Jonas Wiggins—so-called."

"So-*called?*"

The detective smiled. "That was a '*Lapsus;*' I forgot that you were a lawyer. To proceed. Wells—*he* didn't tell me all this,—related to you the story of his adventure with Wiggins and the amethyst cuff button; am I right?"

"You are right."

"May I ask then—did he *show* you this button?"

"No."

"Just here let me say that I know the story of the button—not so well as does Wiggins,—better than does Wells; I know that Wiggins tried to barter it with Mrs. Deering, and that his wife also made the attempt. Both failed. Now—did Wells tell you that the button was in his possession, or that he knew where it was?"

"Pardon me. If Wells has not informed you, *I* cannot."

The detective nodded, as one who would say, I expected as much. Then—

"Did you ever see such a button as Wells and Wiggins described to you?"

"I have."

"And—pardon me the question; it is necessary: did this—have you reason to think that this button was *ever* your property? Remember, what you say never goes beyond these walls to your hurt."

"To my hurt?"

"I mean, I shall never use it *except in your behalf.* Was the button ever your property?"

"I decline to answer."

"Ah! Do you possess the mate to that button, Mr. Deering?"

For answer, Bruce Deering walked to his desk, opened a drawer with a key which he took from a breast pocket, and came back with a tiny leather box in his hand.

"To prove to you, sir," he said, "how thoroughly I am convinced of your sincerity and good faith, I show you—this." He pressed a tiny spring, and held out to Murtagh the open box, wherein lay the counterpart of the amethyst button, with the golden initials engraved upon the stone.

Murtagh took the box, examined its contents, and looked up in surprise; then, suddenly, his face darkened.

"Is *this* your property, Mr. Deering?"

"It is my property," calmly.

"Have you, I ask it once more, *ever* owned its mate?"

"I have not."

"Mr. Deering—is this the button buried by Wiggins and found by Wells?"

"No, sir!"

"Because," went on the detective, slowly, "if this *is* the buried button, as an important bit of evidence in the case—*I shall claim it.*" He moved as if to put the box in his pocket, watching the other narrowly the while.

Deering folded his arms, and looked at him haughtily.

"*I*," he said, quietly, "have been speaking—up to this moment—as one gentleman to another."

The detective's face cleared. He held out the closed jewel box: "And so," said he, "have I! Take it, Mr. Deering. I have yet another question to ask you."

"Ask it. I hope it may be within my power to answer."

"It is this: Do you know whether Joe Matchin had, here or elsewhere, an *enemy?*"

Deering threw back his head, and a sigh of absolute relief broke from his lips, unhindered. "No," he declared almost with vehemence, "I know of no enemy. I do not believe such a man as Joe Matchin could have a *real enemy.*"

"Ah!" murmured Murtagh, as if half to himself, "if that is so, it strengthens my theory materially."

"May I ask what that theory is?"

Murtagh's eyes came back to his face. "My theory, almost from the beginning," he said, "has been, that Matchin was killed *not by an active enemy*, but by one who *could not breathe safely* while *he* continued to live."

Bruce Deering turned quickly and went and replaced the little box in its drawer in the desk. The detective's keen eyes followed him.

"I have added to my theory," he went on, "a conclusion, backed—well, by some slight evidence."

"Well?" spoke Deering, half turning toward him.

"My conclusion, I don't mind confiding to you, is simply that—there's *a woman in the case.*"

The keys, with which he had just locked the small drawer, slid from Deering's hand to the desk, and thence to the floor. He caught them up, and turned toward Murtagh, coming nearer as he spoke.

"Have you any more to add to that?" he asked with sharp sarcasm, "for if you have not, allow me to say that, while I do not in the least doubt your word, I yet feel that you have been sounding and sifting me in all possible ways. Now, since you seem to have done, may I ask *you* one or two questions?"

"Ask them."

"You are a shrewd man. You form your conclusions quickly. Tell me, frankly, what is your opinion of *me? Did* I kill Joe Matchin? or did I not?" He came closer, and they eyed each other straight, each silent for a long moment. Then—

"I don't know why I should not give you my opinion. And first, let me tell you that I've been a detective too long to believe that the man who kills another is always a black villain. Many a man has been murdered who richly deserved his fate. My opinion, sir, is this. Either *you killed Joe Matchin or else you are trying to screen the one who did!* And now, Mr. Deering, I have done; but let me say this. If I have tried to sift and sound you, it has been in no unkindly spirit; and I have seen enough of you, sir, to assure me that, if I ever *do* convince myself that you are guilty, that day I shall hate myself for being in the case!"

"Do you *mean* that?" cried Bruce Deering, with a sudden and violent start.

"Every word."

"And—if I should tell you—if you were convinced that I *had* done this thing, not to save myself—but because it was the *only* way to save another from heartbreak, from misery; if it was done, in short, to save the life, or reason, of another, one—whose life was of more value than a hundred Matchins, faithful and good, according to his light, though he was;—if you knew all this, would you, if you saw the way to do it, withdraw from the case, and—*keep the secret?*"

"And—if I would—what then?"

"Stop—wait! Let us suppose this is *done*, that confession is made, yourself withdrawn; what would be the possible result? Would another take your place, or—would Carton take command?"

"Evidently," said the detective, his face growing exceedingly grave, "you do not fear much from Carton, and you think, as I do also, that *he* would never share the glory such a chance as this would seem to him to hold. Let us state the case differently: I am here, called by Mr. Baird, in behalf of himself and your uncle. If these gentlemen should choose to drop this case, two things would be left to me. I might withdraw in silence, or I might turn over such clues and information as I had gathered, to Sheriff Carton."

"And—would you do this?"

"My dear sir, to put that man in possession of my material, meagre though it may be, would be to turn Pomfret into Pandemonium, and punish the innocent more than the guilty! But enough of this; we are touching dangerous ground, Mr. Deering. Let me beg you to say no more of this sort, and advise you never to let another into your confidence as you have me this night; you have told me more than you think. You might have answered everyone of my questions, and still have told me less. And now I must go; give me something, an envelope will do, to carry in my hand past the chance observers. I have been here too long—quite."

"One moment." Bruce Deering's face flushed as he put the question. "Are you a married man?"

The detective turned with his hand upon the door, and the eyes of the two men met. "I have no wife, no child, neither parents, brothers, nor sisters. And—I am so rich that money has neither weight nor charm for me. Good-night, Mr. Deering."

Out upon the street, Detective Murtagh turned his face toward a star-gemmed sky, and muttered as he hurried away,

"Curse the case! It is becoming more and more a hideous, hateful enigma!"

. . . . . .

Half-an-hour later he stood in the presence of Lysander Deering, who arose to receive him, and, without a preliminary word of any sort, began,

"Mr. Murtagh, you have been, as you, of course, are aware, employed by my partner, Mr. Baird, acting for himself and for me, jointly, as interested in the tragedy at our bank. And if I rightly understand, you come from a private bureau, and are in no way connected with the regular police, or city detective force. Am I right?"

"Quite right, sir."

"Ah! This being the case then, is the business of this engagement transacted by yourself alone, or through your bureau? I have not informed myself."

"In most cases, sir, the 'business' of the bureau is done by its officers. In my own case, it is left to myself altogether; I am, what might be called, an agent at large, answerable only to my employers."

"Thank you. I am aware that what I am about to propose may seem strange, unusual; even beyond all precedent; but you are doubtless accustomed to strange things. I have been informed by my partner and friend, that you have, as yet, no definite data, nothing beyond clues, doubts, suspicions; you are not prepared to denounce—anyone?"

"No—o—not—yet!"

"No." The old man had been speaking like one who hastens through a difficult matter, with failing strength, and now his voice trembled perceptibly. "No, you say? Then, sir, will you name a sum sufficient to compensate you for all that you have done, as well as for the disappointment and probable loss you may experience, in the dropping of this case? And let it end, so far as *we* are concerned, *now;* from this very moment."

"You wish to *drop the case altogether?*"

"So far as I and my partner are concerned. Of course I am aware that our sheriff will endeavour to carry it on. I owe it to you to explain; but, first, are you willing to let it drop?"

Murtagh was silent a long moment; then—"I came here," he said quietly, "solely to serve, or assist, Mr. Baird and yourself. I await your orders—and his."

"Mr. Baird will be one with me in this. My good sir, I believe you to be a man capable of solving this riddle; and, ten years ago, I might have said 'Go on,' let who must be sacrificed. Even a week ago I vowed that I would spend my last dollar to see Joe Matchin avenged. A week ago! To-day, I say to you, I would give my last dollar rather than see this case go on. If you had reached a certainty, and could tell me that, to drop your work now, would be simply to let the wrongdoer escape, I should not dare to withdraw; it would then be too late. If I *knew* the truth, I should neither dare stifle my voice, nor stay your hand, but I have only belief and fear. I believe firmly in the integrity of Bruce Deering, nothing can shake *that!* But I have a doubt, and a fear, which would turn into horror unutterable, if I let you go on, and found, too late, my fear realised. I am an old man, sir, and I cannot bear to see the trouble, the shame and sorrow, which would fall upon the innocent, if—if what I fear should come to pass."

"Mr. Deering," broke out the detective, "I wish we could understand each other—because I—" he stopped short, a look of perplexity upon his face—"the fact is I—I have been following up a clue which *may* lead quite away from—Mr. Bruce Deering."

"Ah! Then I have spoken none too soon! But I must not question you; I have too little doubt of your sagacity! Let others unearth the destroyer of faithful, honest old Matchin if they can! It must not, *it must* NOT be through *me* that it is done. Tell me, will you give up the case?"

"Mr. Deering, like yourself, a week ago, yes, twenty-four hours ago, I should have taken it hard if this had been asked of me, and should have yielded reluctantly. It is no common case this; and there's more behind it all than Pomfret has ever dreamed of. But—*you* are not the first who has sought to stay my hand. And, if Mr. Baird adds his word to yours—I am done with the Matchin murder case."

Lysander Deering dropped into a chair, and a heavy sigh told the relief of his heart. "One moment," he said, and took up a pen.

A few moments there was stillness in the room save for the nervous scratching of the swift-moving pen. Then Mr. Deering came to Murtagh's side and put an envelope and a slip of paper into his hand.

"The letter is for Baird," he said, "and the other for yourself. When Baird has read the letter, you may tell him what I have said to you, word for word, *then*—you will decide."

"I have already decided; I am sure of Mr. Baird's decision in advance." He looked down at the cheque in his hand, and, turning, laid it upon the desk.

"Allow me to settle with Mr. Baird," he said with respectful firmness; "I cannot take that. You have not meant it so, I am sure, Mr. Deering, but—I should feel as if I had *taken a bribe if I accepted that.*"

To say that Mr. Baird was surprised—upon hearing from Murtagh the result of his conference with Lysander Deering—would be saying too little. But, amazed as he might be, he was loyal to his friend. That this sudden change troubled him was evident, and he pondered long, and with a very grave face before he spoke. At last he said:

"I can't in the least understand Deering's motive or meaning. I am utterly at a loss! But I have full faith in him, and in all that he does, and shall of course carry out his wishes. I appreciate your willingness to drop this case, Mr. Murtagh; it is one that might easily end for you with success and honour, and not every man would give up such a case without protest. As for myself, while I shall watch over Bruce Deering's interests as closely as before, I shall feel, unless another man, as shrewd as yourself, is brought into the business against us, that, so far as Bruce is concerned, there is little, except mere annoyance, to look forward to. But Carton will never call in a detective, and thus admit a doubt of his own ability *and—I*—shall not make it known to all Pomfret that Deering and I, with yourself understood, are no longer seeking the murderers of Joe Matchin. As to that cheque, my friend, you might as well accept it. Deering will always look upon it as yours, and, in some way, it will be pretty sure to come back to you."

Murtagh smiled. "As to that," he said, "now that we are no longer employer and employed, but may speak as man to man, I will say, not wishing to 'ape a virtue and have it not,' that I do not need this cheque; I am a detective from choice, rather than necessity. I shall notify my chief of my withdrawal from the case, and, in due time, you will doubtless receive a statement from headquarters, dating from my arrival in Pomfret to the present hour. How many others will be taken into your confidence? Young Deering, of course?"

"Of course; and Arden. John Redding, you know, intends to act

as counsel for Bruce, if counsel is ever needed; so I daresay we shall also confide in him."

"A good thing to do. Necessary, in fact, if, as you say, his services are ever needed; and this suggests—if you care to hear my opinion, Mr. Baird—"

"*Your* opinion! What modesty!" Between the suddenness of the change just made, its seriousness, and his own anxiety, the banker had become nervous, and almost petulant. "As if your candid opinion, just now, is not the very thing I want *most*."

"Then I will say on. First, the case: I believe it *will* come to trial, and am glad to know that Mr. Redding is to be Deering's attorney. I liked the man from the first; he is shrewd, clear-headed, and cool. I mean to leave with you, Mr. Baird, an address which will always reach me; and if this affair does come to a crisis, and I can serve yourself or—Mr. Redding, let me hear from you. I think I could give Mr. Redding some points which might be of service to him. And—another word of advice—in case of an emergency, remember that Tom Wells is a friend to Deering. In case of trouble or—treachery, remember that Jonas Wiggins is *an enemy*." He pushed back his chair and arose. "It is late," he said; "I will retain my position, as 'John Ross,' by your leave, until I make my exit, which will have to be soon."

"One moment!" exclaimed the banker eagerly. "Sit down again. You are no longer *ex-officio*. Will you not tell me *now*, just how this matter stands—in your eyes? Hitherto I have kept silence, and forebore to comment or question. From time to time you have put me through a singular catechism; may I now ask the meaning of some of your queries? And, above all, you came to us, aware that we were the friends of Bruce Deering, and working in his interest, I have wondered if you have given me your real opinion—your *last* opinion? Since you have been among us, have you learned anything which could serve to turn a neutral judgment for, or against? In short, what is your opinion of Bruce Deering *now?*"

"You mean of his guilt or innocence?"

"Of course."

"I will tell you. My opinions or my theories have not been changed since the first day, except relatively. When I had been here forty-eight hours, I said, either of three things is *possible*. First, Bruce Deering *may* be guilty; next, Bruce Deering may have knowledge of this murder and a *strong reason* for screening the assassin, even at his own peril; *or*, Bruce Deering may have no atom of knowledge concerning said murder, but may be instead *the victim of a plot*."

"And now? Your opinion *now?*"

"The same; with this difference,—to-day the theory of his guilt looks—just possible; that of victim of unknown enemies, probable; and his possible knowledge and self-sacrifice, *likely*."

"Ah! Then you do connect him *in some way* with the affair?"

"I do. All the evidence, for or against him, fits into one or the other of these three presumable cases."

The banker sighed. "I should like to know how you reasoned upon these three possible cases."

"I will try and show you, briefly. First, then, the guilt theory.

Here is the suspected man, young, strong, keen-witted, a lawyer in fine. Take the evidence, a string of circumstances leading straight to him. It is an injustice to his intelligence! There is too *much* of it. Again, there is but one reason brought forward for the murder; all is based upon this reason. Now, if it were true that Matchin had a hold upon this young man, and was killed because of this, don't you see that this murder *must* have been premeditated? Now, who would believe that a clever young man ever set out in evening dress, knowing that his friends were close at his heels, to commit a murder? Yet this is what they would claim. No, sir. If Deering did the deed, it was unpremeditated. And for *that* you must find a new motive! The Rose Matchin theory won't fit. If they try him upon *that* theory, they can't make things hang together, and he'll be safe enough."

"Ah! I see you don't believe in your first theory."

"Not too fast. I say *if* he did it, it was not premeditated; and *if* not, there must be found, and *proved*, a new reason for the deed!"

"And your next theory?"

"That he may have been made a victim of circumstances, of enemies. Why, man, that long string of circumstantial evidence *never* 'came to pass' by accident; somebody planned, at least, a part of it!"

"What! Do you imagine anyone could *know* that he would pass the bank alone at that especial hour?"

"By no means! But somebody, unaware of the Frazier supper party, and counting upon Deering's regular habits, might easily have counted upon his being safe in bed, with no witness to prove the fact. However, there's a flaw in this theory."

"How is that?"

"In the coincidence of Deering passing the bank at the very moment of the murder; it's too dramatic to be true to Nature."

"Sometimes," mused Mr. Baird, "Nature furnishes us with the strangest of dramas. But this brings us to your last theoretical case?"

"Yes. That Deering knows, and is seeking to screen, the culprit. This looks the most plausible. *This* would explain almost everything."

"And how?"

"Take the fact of his presence, unpremeditated, of course. He is coming home, sees the light, hears the sounds, enters, as he has said, meets the assassin, and grapples with him. May he not have *recognised* him, or *her*, perhaps?"

"Her! Good Heavens! Man, are you thinking of Ora Wardell?"

"I wish I knew *what* to think of Miss Wardell!"

The banker was silent for a moment. Then he sighed.

"I wish *I* could feel certain that my friend Deering has not made a mistake. It puzzles me. He proposes to believe in his nephew's innocence, and one would think he would wish to move heaven and earth to see that innocence proved. Bruce may not be convicted, but, will he be acquitted? In the face of the circumstantial evidence, his innocence should be made clear as daylight, and for that we need *you*."

"Mr. Deering and his nephew seem to understand each other. Perhaps—I only suggest this—perhaps they agree in this. As to young Deering's chances, I think the elder Deering feels confident that the grand jury will extort no more damaging evidence than did

the coroners ; and, clearly, he sees no enemies in ambush, and does not fear Carton."

"But why is he willing to risk a verdict *not* of acquittal, but of 'not proven,'—dismissed for lack of evidence?"

"I can only suggest as before, Bruce Deering may have been more frank with his uncle than with you or me."

"And that means that both would sooner risk a doubtful verdict than let you go on and ferret out the truth! Murtagh, if that is so, then you must have come dangerously near it! Ah, well," he sighed heavily, and taking up Deering's letter, ran his eyes over certain paragraphs. "Well, I suppose I must give up the problem. Deering appeals to my friendship, my confidence, and declares that he cannot, and *must* not, let this investigation go on. I submit, but I don't like it, and I fear the consequences."

"If you feel like this, how will it be with Arden, Redding, and Liscom?"

"Like myself, they will defer to Deering, every one ; and the more readily, because of his broken health and the danger of his condition. You see Lysander Deering is really the one who, had he been in Pomfret at the time of the murder, would have been at the head of affairs, instead of myself. He is the bank's president, its largest stockholder, and, besides, was the one who put Joe Matchin in his place three years ago, before I ever knew the man. What is it?"

For the detective, as the banker uttered his last sentence, had struck himself upon the knee suddenly, and with a quick accompanying look of annoyance—

"It's—well, it's really nothing now," responded Murtagh. "Only it's surprising how one will let these little points slip, and the little points sometimes develop wonderfully. Here, for instance, it never once occurred to ask, at the right time, *who* put Joe Matchin in his place at the bank? And yet—who knows—" He stopped, and uttered a short laugh. "That's a point for my successor," he added, "or—for Sheriff Carton."

CHAPTER XXIV.

BROOK.

THE week which followed the withdrawal of Detective Murtagh from the Pomfret Bank Tragedy, as the affair had come to be named in the newspapers of the neighbourhood, was, outwardly at least, a very quiet one ; not that the interest had in the least lessened in the town and county, and even beyond, but nothing happened, and there were only rumours and gossip for the eagerly waiting public.

Murtagh had remained several days in Pomfret, keeping, to the end, his place as Mr. Baird's new man, and going at last suddenly, and in the sight of men. Receiving in the morning a telegraphic message warning him of the illness of his "only brother," bidding an ostentatious farewell to Tom Wells and others in the afternoon, and departing

in the early evening with due gravity, and many publicly uttered regrets at leaving so good a place as "Banker Baird's."

Before going, he had talked with Tom Wells privately as well as in public, leaving in Tom's retentive memory certain hints and suggestions for his possible future use; and also leaving with him, to be duly posted, a letter addressed to Jonas Wiggins, wherein that personage was sharply reminded that the "eye of fate" was always upon him, and bidding him hold himself discreetly aloof from "all persons and matter connected with a certain button, no longer in his possession."

"You see, Wells," Murtagh had said, "I quit playing horse-jockey to-night, and as I think I can make myself more useful in another quarter, you may not see me again for—well, for some time. See? So look out for Wiggins, and if you think he meditates any mischief, give him a little scare. Don't let him go before the Grand Jury if it can be prevented. I guess *you* can 'prevent.'" And so they separated, with Wells in fond faith that, somewhere, unseen but sure, Murtagh was still devoted to the Pomfret mystery.

The day after his interview with the detective, Lysander Deering did not leave his room. He had passed an almost sleepless night, and was feverish, and so suddenly weak, that Brenda was anxious at once to send for Doctor Liscom. But her husband would not hear of it. He was only tired, he insisted. What he wanted was rest, perfect rest, and quiet. She must see that he had this, no one must be admitted, unless it might be Bruce, whom, by the way, he did not look for.

"Liscom has turned me off, you know," he said, with an attempt at playfulness. "You know he said when I went to New York that he washed his hands of me, that I was food for the specialist. By the way, when does Doctor Ware come back?"

"He might come at any time now," Brenda told him; and he declared himself in favour of Doctor Ware.

"He has followed the case from first to last, and has heard the instructions of the great wise man," he argued, meaning by the "wise man" the city physician to whom Doctor Liscom had sent him for the last word upon his case. "We will wait for Ware, Princess; somehow, I like the young fellow; he's the best of company, and, just now, a little good company, not too intimate with Pomfret, is what we all need."

Doctor Ware, the young physician who had accompanied them from New York, had proved both useful and agreeable in more ways than one. Being at Pomfret, he had decided to go a little farther west, where a cousin, who had grown up in the Ware household like a brother, had established himself at Preston, seventy miles away, and on the direct railway line from Pomfret. He would spend a few days with his cousin, Doctor Ware had said, and on his return, at their request, he would stop and see if the invalid had further need of him.

And so it came to pass that Lysander Deering spent the long day alone in his room, denying himself even to Mr. Baird, to whom he sent down these faintly scrawled lines:

"KIND FRIEND,—Be kind to me now and excuse me! Kinder yet and tell *those who must know*, how we have disposed of our concern in the *horror*. Make them to understand that *for me it is past* discussion. I have informed B. D. by message. DEERING."

And so it also came to pass that Mr. Baird passed an uncomfortable series of half-hours calling in turn upon the clergyman, the coroner, and the lawyer, telling each that the active work upon the "Pomfret Mystery" was now given over to the hands of Sheriff Carton and his numerous deputies, and giving to each the same answer to the same question:

"I cannot tell! I don't understand it! I only know that I, for one, shall abide by Deering's decision. There is a mystery here, greater even than we at first supposed, and including, perhaps threatening, those we never dreamed of in connection with the case. I, for one, shall comply without further question." And the clergyman and the coroner had decided likewise; but John Redding said:

"I have nothing to say to this! But I shall not abandon Bruce Deering's interests! I believe your detective knows more than he has told. And if I see Bruce in danger, I shall call upon him for this knowledge."

Lysander Deering appeared at the breakfast-table next day pale and more languid than usual, but otherwise quite himself. The word had gone forth to the household, and the name of Joe Matchin was not breathed aloud in or about Beechwood, nor was the bank tragedy discussed aloud, above stairs or below.

Before noon Doctor Ware appeared; he was in the best of spirits, and the elder man seemed to be at once awakened and aroused out of himself. In the afternoon he ordered the carriage and announced his intention of taking Doctor Ware to drive.

"He has hardly seen Pomfret," he declared to Brenda, "and I feel the need of a little mild exercise myself."

When they had spent an hour or more driving around and about Pomfret, and had turned the horses' heads toward home, Mr. Deering directed the conversation, which before had been fitful, toward himself and his late illness, recalling some of the opinions and injunctions of the city physician, and questioning the younger practitioner as to his own ideas and opinions.

"The fact is, doctor," he said after a little, and speaking with sudden gravity, "I want to have a few words with you, which must be at once frank and confidential, concerning myself. Doctor Brandreth has assured me that I may rely upon you as upon himself—that you thoroughly understand my case. Tell me, do I seem to you the same as when you set out for Preston—the same, physically and mentally?"

The young doctor favoured him with a quick, sharp, side glance, and said,

"Frankly, no, Mr. Deering. I see a difference. I should say that you have not been able to follow out Brandreth's injunctions, to avoid mental disturbance, and all but the lightest physical effort. You seem to me to have encountered some disturbing element, or circumstance. Bodily, you have been over-active, and mentally, you are *even now* disturbed and unsettled—am I saying too much?"

"You are saying no more than the truth. Doctor, you are acquainted with the unhappy business which brought me home, and you know that a member of my own family has been connected with it, most unfortunately. I need not go into details, I *cannot*, indeed! What I *must* tell you is this—I *have* been seriously disturbed, excited, tried, within the last few days, and I feel the effects of the strain. For my wife's sake I am trying to spare myself, in fact am pursuing a course quite other than I would were she not to be considered. But I cannot keep utterly out of the trouble all about us. And I cannot go away. Indeed, my wife would be the last person, under present circumstances, to ask it. I want to ask two things of you. First, I wish you to tell me, candidly, frankly, without fear of its effects upon me, for suspense is my worst enemy now—I want to know if you think there is danger for me in—in the present environments? If, should there come yet more trouble, a still harder shock, is my life in danger? and, is my time short? Wait. I *must* know! there is much in the way of business which *must* be done! neglect would result in wrong to others! Great wrong! I don't ask you to answer now, hastily! Think this over. Look me over, if there is need; and this evening, after dinner, come to me in the library and let us talk freely with each other."

"Thank you, Mr. Deering." Doctor Ware drew a long breath of relief. "I should much prefer that; and, while I believe that you have more of strength and vitality than even Doctor Brandreth is aware of, but quite agree with you, any business that will tend to ease of mind, should be at once transacted. This done, I think you may see many years yet; you possess two strong aids to health, worth, indeed, even more than our medical skill, and both together, all together, I think your case is far from desperate."

"And those aids?"

"Are courage, and strength of will. I might add patience, as well."

"Thanks, doctor, and now for my next request. It is this. If I *should* break down, and, somehow, I feel strangely upon this subject—almost superstitious, in fact—I, who have never before been superstitious—if I *should* need the care of a physician, will you come to Pomfret and take me in charge—exclusive charge?" There was a quiver of the voice as he uttered the last two words. Then after a moment of silence he added with a half laugh that had a tinge of nervousness in it,

"Doctor, I may as well expose all my weaknesses! For what else am I your patient? But, first,—will you come at need?"

"At this moment, Mr. Deering, I know of nothing to prevent. As you are aware, at present I am Doctor Brandreth's assistant, and I think he will hardly object. He takes great interest in your case, and in yourself. But your confession, I am anxious to hear it all."

"Ware, do you believe in dreams, signs, warnings?"

"That's a large question. I don't know why I should not. We should not disown what we cannot disprove. We are surrounded by mystery; are ourselves mysteries; and dreams, sleep! that is the greatest mystery."

"Well, I have had a dream. I have never been a superstitious

man, and this is most likely an idiosyncrasy of my disease, nothing more. But you shall judge—and laugh, if you like."

"I shall not laugh. Only a man of small wit laughs at what is beyond his comprehension."

"True. Briefly, then, I have three times dreamed that I was dead, that I died suddenly, and that when dying, at the last gasp, conscious but helpless, I saw, seemingly fleeing from me, but with faces turned back, two figures, a man and a woman. I could not distinguish clearly either their faces or their forms, although in my dream I knew them, and called to them as they fled; called each *by name*. Yes; in my dream I knew them, and was filled with horror that it should be *they*. But, upon waking, while I could recall every other ghastly detail of the dream, I could not recall their names. But I knew they had killed me, they had given me a poisoned drink. I did not see the act, but I knew it had been done. Each time as they fled, I arose, dying though I was, and took two or three steps toward them, then I fell dead, and falling, awoke."

"Fell dead—and—"

"Yes, fell, knowing myself dead as I fell. I tell you the sensation was most horrible! At the instant of waking I had the feeling of actual coming back to life."

"Singular; and when did this dream first occur?"

"Oh, I see you *do* think it the result of my sickness. But I dreamed it *first* two years ago, when I was, or believed myself, in perfect health."

"And next?"

"Ah! what will you say to *this?* It came next in New York, when I was totally unaware of trouble here at home. It came on *the night of Joe Matchin's murder*, which *I* did not hear of until a week later."

Doctor Ware looked very grave.

"Very strange, certainly," he said; "and the third dream?"

"Came the night before last. It almost upset me. I had been more than usually worried and troubled that day, and unusually anxious and excited that evening. It was more than I could easily shake off. I kept my room all day."

For a long time they drove on in utter silence. Then the younger man looked about him suddenly, as if seeking to shake off some troublesome thought, and saw that they were nearing Beechwood.

"If you don't object, Mr. Deering," he said soberly, "I should like to talk of this again. At present, I think it is best that we withdraw our minds from the subject as soon as possible. Meantime," he added, "I thank you for telling me this."

"And I," rejoined Deering, as they were entering the gate, "am glad I have told it! It's a relief, somehow!"

Dinner that day would have been a very solemn and silent function, had it not been for Doctor Ware and Brenda Deering. Mr. Deering looked weary and ate little, and Valentine was silent and listless, and ate almost nothing. The evening was a dark and gloomy one, the sun had set in a bank of clouds, and a cool wind had sprung up from westward, rushing and rustling among the leafy branches of the trees about the house, and causing the trellised vines and climbing rose bushes to

creak and scatter their leaves and blossoms. A little more than a mile away, across the creek and through the wood, ran the railroad track which curved inward farther south and entered the town at its lower end. The A. C. and D. was a busy road, and to-night the trains seemed rushing through the dark wood, recklessly and often, and with an unusually fiendish clamour and clang of bells and whistles and wheels.

They had finished dinner, and dessert was upon the table, when suddenly the wind seemed to rise, the rain began to pour, and there came a blinding flash of lightning and a peal of thunder that was deafening; and for half-an-hour they sat about the table and listened and talked fitfully, while the storm raged and the thunder and lightning seemed almost constant. Then, suddenly, the door of the dining-room was flung open, and one of the maids sprang into the room with a white, scared face.

"Oh!" she cried, "there's been an accident on the railroad, and the car is burned and everybody killed or burnt to death! You can hear 'em from the east porch, and the men—"

It was Doctor Ware who, rising swiftly and turning upon her, checked her excited speech with a commanding gesture.

"Silence!" he said, then turning back, "Mr. Deering, ladies, allow me to go out and make a rational inquiry. It will take but a moment;" then taking the girl by the arm, "Come with me," he said, and led her from the room.

"What do you mean," he asked sternly when they were outside, "by coming in upon your sick master with such a tale as that? Have you not been warned, told, that he must not be startled, or troubled, in any such way?"

"I—I couldn't help it, indeed," she began to whimper, "it was all so sudden and—and Sarita said *someone* must go and tell Mr. Deering, for he might want to send assistance to the wreck and—"

"Marthe!" They had reached the servants' stairway, and, looking up at the sound of the sharp voice, they saw Sarita herself gazing down upon them. "Marthe," she said again, "'tis not so! Can you *never* do things right? I bade you go at once to the road, to the lowest gate, and there tell those who pass, that the poor people may have help quickly. *Dieu!* But it is awful! And, *le docteur*," bending down, and speaking in a tremulous tone of appeal, "will *he* not go to the help of those suffering, those wretched ones? Marthe!" again sharp and imperative, "go at once, at once; the lower gate."

Doctor Ware heard these last words as he passed on and out upon the east porch. He had not needed Sarita's appeal, but had already decided that, if the alarm were not a false one, he must at once go to the help of the victims of the accident. And he came out through the doorway with a question upon his lips. To his surprise he found there only the housekeeper, who was standing just outside, a lamp held aloft, and her gaze turned toward the paddock gate, through which he could just discern, aided by the lights from the house, the hastily retreating forms of two or three men.

"What is it, Mrs. Merton?" he asked quickly. "Has there really been an accident? I thought—"

"Yes," she broke in, "I am afraid so; a man—or a boy rather—came rushing to the kitchen door; he was guided, he says, by the light across the field, and thought ours must be the nearest place to come for help. They were thrown down the embankment over there—two coaches, he said, well filled, and many are hurt, and the coaches badly crushed with people penned inside them. *Hear* them!" shielding her lamp with a large, plump hand. Through the rush of the rain and the gusts of wind they could hear the cries of men, and the uneven sound of a bell, half-muffled and metallic, as if, maimed and broken from its anchorage, it were being struck fiercely with hammers or bars of iron. "We were at supper when the boy came," Mrs. Merton went on; "and before I could move or say a word, Sarita flew up like a mad woman, fairly shrieking to the men that they must go at once—back with the boy and help; and, before I knew it, she had them all out of the house and there they go! And the maids, she has sent everyone out to the road to hail the passers-by, and now she has rushed off to her room to pray, she says, at this time, when she and I are the only ones left to do anything."

It was quite true. Already the men were running across the field, and the maids could be heard calling to each other from the upper and lower gates.

Doctor Ware was the man for emergencies. In a few words he made known to those who waited in the dining-room the little he himself had found out. And seeing that Mr. Deering had received no harm from the shock, and that all three were only anxious for the sufferers out in the night and storm, he at once prepared to go, like the rest, to the scene of horror, equipped for the work which, he knew, would be ready to his hand.

"If we can send anything, do anything! Doctor, send back those men of mine at once," said Mr. Deering, "or make any use of them that you can. And—the sufferers—there are houses much nearer and easier of access, but ours is open to the sufferers,—you understand?"

Intent upon his errand, the young man ran hastily up to his room by the front stairway, and, having obtained all that he would be most likely to need, he bethought himself of the rear stairway as being nearer than the other, and hurried down the hall; he moved swiftly, and, as he began the descent of the stairs, he heard, below him, a low, sibilant sound, like an exclamation quickly stifled, and followed by two or three whispered words. He was only a moment in reaching the foot of the stairs, and in one swift glance took in several things. The hall below, lately so well illuminated, was in almost total darkness, except for the curving approach to the servants' living room and the kitchen; from this an unseen light threw some gleam across the door opening upon the porch at the foot of the stairs, and directly in his path stood Sarita. He put out his hand and touched her, as a signal to make way for him, and he felt that she was trembling violently, her face turned toward the closed door.

"Allow me to pass," he said, in a low tone. "Who went out just now?"

She started, and uttered a strange sound, half-scream, half-shout, but she did not make way for him to pass.

"Oh!" she began, catching at his arm as she turned toward him. "*Le Docteur! Is* it *you, only!* Fie upon me! See how I tremble, and only at *you!*"

"At me?"

"Ah, yes. I was looking, when, *pauf!* the light goes out, and I close the door, and hear, suddenly, when I think no one is above, and when Mrs. Merton is in the dining-room, someone coming behind me down the stairs, so quickly! My feet will not move! Ah! I tremble yet!"

"Do you mean to say," demanded he, impatiently, "that *no one* went out at that door just now?"

"Now! Why, there *is* no one to go! Only *I* looking out." She was still before him at the foot of the stairway, and he put her gently but firmly aside. "It is so dark, here," she persisted, "you saw only a shadow, mine, of course."

"Very likely," he said, dryly. "It was as tall as I, and it went out, as I must do. I would advise you to light the hall again."

But quick as he was, Sarita was quicker.

"Do you think someone *is* out there?" she cried with a shrill, nervous half-laugh. "Let us *see!*" She sprang to the door, opened it a little way, and thrust her head out. "Who's there?" she called, shrilly; "Marthe, girls; is this the time to make jokes?" Then she stepped back, "See," she said, "there is nobody—nobody at all!"

"So it seems," replied the doctor, and he went out into the darkness, but, as he picked his way with all possible haste through the paddock and on toward the wreck, he muttered, "Only a shadow, was it? Well, maybe, but my eyes are good, they don't often deceive me, and I could almost swear that I saw a man's figure steal through that door. I wonder if the little Frenchwoman has, by any chance, a follower."

A few moments later, Mrs. Merton came out from the dining-room and down the hall, which was still in darkness; she could dimly see that the door beyond was open a few inches, and, coming closer where the rays from the light beyond the curve made things clearer, she could see a hand holding the door in position, its owner invisible without.

"Sarita!" she exclaimed, pulling the door open with a quick jerk, "what *are* you doing outside in the dark like that? You look like a listening Indian."

Sarita started nervously, and then stepped inside, closing the door carefully behind her.

"I was listening for a man," she whispered cautiously.

"For a *man!* My patience! as if you hadn't sent away every man jack on the place your own self, even to the doctor."

"The doctor,—yes; that's it. The doctor declares that he saw a man go out of this door just ahead of him. Of course it couldn't be, could it? But it made me feel—a fidget, and I must look, you see."

"Umph!" scoffed Mrs. Merton, "little enough good your looking out for strange men will do; we'd much better be making ready for any poor hurt creature that may be brought here from that wreck. We're to take all that can be got here; that's the order," and she sailed toward the kitchen, Sarita following slowly in her wake.

Meantime the Deerings had betaken themselves to the drawing-room, Valentine soon following; and here, for nearly an hour, they sat, talking but little, and waiting anxiously the return of someone with news from the scene of the disaster. Instead of being excited to his hurt, or in any way unnerved by the occurrence, Mr. Deering was the calmest of the three, only regretting that he might not venture forth through the storm to serve and aid whom he might. Brenda was very silent; the thought of such horror and suffering so near was more than she could bear calmly, and she longed to be assured that the reality was not so bad as the pictures her active imagination drew. As for Valentine, she seemed growing more nervous every moment; and when almost an hour had passed, she stopped her march up and down the length of the drawing-room, and went to the door.

"I am going out upon the balcony," she said; "I am stifling here." She threw open the door and started back with a cry.

Just across the threshold, soiled, and torn, and pale, but with hands outstretched, stood a young man, handsome in spite of all, and smiling as he made a slow step across the threshold.

"*Brook!*" cried Valentine.

"*Brook Deering!*" cried Brenda, springing up.

"Brook, *Brook!*" cried the man in the easy-chair, and, half rising, he fell back with closed eyes.

CHAPTER XXV.

BRENDA'S WARNING.

MR. DEERING had not lost consciousness; he was soon able to swallow some water, and to sit erect and greet his son, who, now that the first startled moments of meeting were over, seemed to each of the three shockingly unlike the Brook Deering they had parted from less than two years before.

That Brook Deering was a picture of bright young manhood, brimming over with exuberant spirits; the Brook Deering now before them was pale, and thinner than they had known him, with a strange strained look in the large blue eyes and about the handsome mobile mouth, and a nervous tremulousness in every movement of the slim, white hands, grown thin like the face. As he crossed the room to draw a chair forward, that he might seat himself beside his father, they noted, too, that he limped painfully. In the surprise of his arrival, no one had thought of the manner of it; but now Val seemed suddenly enlightened.

"Brook!" she exclaimed, "you—you came—you were upon *that train?*"

"Yes," he answered. "Do I not *look* as if I had been wrecked?" The soft slow voice was the same as of old, with only an added note of fatigue in it. And, when the chorus of exclamations and questions had ceased, Brook told them how he had arrived in New York by an earlier steamer than he had at first chosen, finding that he "could easily manage it so."

"You see," he narrated, leaning back in the softly-cushioned chair,

quite regardless of his soil and disarray, and looking oftenest at Valentine while he spoke—"you see, I chanced, almost at the last moment, upon Craig—Henry Craig. I do not know whether you ever heard me speak of him or not; I knew him at college, *just* knew him, no more; well, he was booked for an earlier boat, and began to relate to me how he found his time for sailing coming quite too soon; how much he'd give for another week on shore, etc. I believe, as usual, there was a young lady in it. I didn't interest myself much in his reasons, but I having got myself into a fever to come home, was anxious to be off. So to be brief, we made an exchange. I set out a week earlier than I had hoped to do, with his ticket, and without going through the formula of exchanging my name for his on the passenger list. You know I'm always a little sea sick, and this time I was very much worse than usual, so much so that I could hardly keep on my legs, even when we reached New York; and I had to stay there, willy nilly, and coddle myself. The doctor there said that the trouble was in my system before I left the other side; called it a malarial complication, aggravated by sea-sickness, and a severe cold. Of course, I wouldn't alarm you by wiring, as he warranted me able to come on in a few days, and, of *course*, I chanced upon that unlucky train, and the jar of the fall down that embankment, together with the other horrors, have about upset me."

"Oh!" Brenda sprang toward the bell, but Brook put out his hand.

"Don't ring, Mamma Brenda—"

"I must. Pardon me, Brook! You *must* go to your room, I—"

"Wait. I met Mrs. Merton as I came in; she is looking out for me, never fear." He turned toward Valentine.

"Did you receive my letters, Cousin Val?"

"I did," replied the girl, a touch of restraint in her tone. "*One* at least; the one announcing your coming. The other was received, I regret to say, by my dog Cap, in my absence, and was torn to tatters before I became aware of its existence."

Brook laughed softly. "I must become acquainted with that animal. Did you—could you decipher any part of it?"

"A word and a date, nothing more."

"There was not much more. It was written later than the other by three days, and was to tell you that I was coming earlier than I, at first, announced to you. It was not a brilliant epistle, and Cap was a sagacious dog." He turned again toward his father, his face becoming suddenly grave.

"You knew of the accident, sir?" he said, and before Mr. Deering could reply, went on; "it's a sad affair, but not so many hurt as was at first feared. It's bad enough, however; several killed; others, probably a dozen, seriously wounded, and nearly all more or less bruised or scratched, jarred, or lamed—like myself." He got up as he spoke, slowly, and with evident effort, and his father broke in suddenly:

"Boy, you *must* get out of those garments at once! You *are* lame, and you do not look too well! Don't stop here a moment longer."

"Thank you, sir. The fact is, I tried to help a little, without at first realising that I was not up to it. It was not pleasant work. Luckily

there's a fine fellow of a doctor at hand doing wonders, and everywhere at once, it would seem." While he was speaking, Mrs. Merton had opened the door, and she now came forward.

"Your room is ready, sir," she said, with a smile, for Brook Deering was a favourite with the Beechwood household.

"And he must go at once," broke in Brenda, and she went with him to the door and out into the hall beyond.

"Brenda," her husband called after them, "when Ware comes back he must look after Brook's lameness." She nodded and walked with Brook to the foot of the stairs; her face was very serious, and she seemed about to begin some speech, over which she evidently hesitated, when he turned and laid his two hands upon her arms just above the wrists—a boyish gesture which she at once recognised with a half smile.

"Mamma Brenda," he began anxiously, with his blue eyes seeking hers, "I want you to tell me about my father. Has he been ill, or troubled, or both? He looks both sick and sorry! It made my heart jump when I first saw him. What *is* it?"

Brenda nodded toward the stairs, where, half-way up, Mrs. Merton was standing, and drew away her hands.

"Impulsive as ever, I see," she smiled. "Your father has been quite ill, Brook, but he is better now, and, we hope, improving, although I have felt anxious at times, and am very glad you have come just at this time. When you are thoroughly rested, come to my *boudoir;* I want to have a talk with you, alone, and soon—*before you talk with the others*, in fact. Now, go, I won't even question you about the accident; although we know so little concerning it. Do you feel that you can talk with me just a little to-night?"

"I will come to you in half-an-hour, fair lady," he said, with a smile, as he began to mount the steps slowly, and with evident painful effort.

Before half-an-hour had passed, owing to the thoughtfulness of Doctor Ware, who sent one of the men as soon as he could be spared, they had further news from the wreck.

Across the creek, and on the further side of the railway track, were some half-a-dozen houses, all of them being much nearer the scene of the disaster than was Beechwood, and one fortunately was so large, having been erected for the use of workmen lately engaged in laying a double track along the line—that all the dead, seven in number, could be readily and decently sheltered there, while the farm-houses nearer opened hospitable doors to the seriously wounded, and gave temporary shelter to all in any way disabled. For the rest, the uninjured women and children, were, by the direction of Doctor Ware, already nearing Beechwood, where he had assured them shelter, and whither they were being guided by the big soft-hearted gardener. And so, for the remainder of the night and all of the following day the splendid Deering house was turned into an hospital, where frightened children and weary women were housed and fed and clad, and Brenda, Valentine, Mrs. Merton, and the maids were too busy for thought of anything save their stranger guests, their needs and comforts.

"Mrs. Merton," said Brenda with prompt decision, as she threw open the doors of her dainty rooms to her wet and bedraggled guests,

we must have fires all over the house, in all the chambers, and upon this floor. And hot tea and coffee must be prepared at once; food, of course, later, as soon as maybe. *You* will attend to this, and Sarita—where *is* Sarita?" for, looking about among the faces grouped around her, eagerly awaiting her instructions, Sarita's was the only one missing. And then, upstairs and down, the name of Sarita was called and called again; but it was some moments later that Sarita appeared among them, no one seemed to know just whence or how.

"Madam Sarita," spoke Mrs. Merton, with a touch of sharpness in her voice, "we have needed you; Mrs. Deering has called—"

"Ah, I am sorry!" broke in the tardy one, in an unsteady voice, and clutching the arm of the girl near her, not seeming to notice that it was the same whom, not long before, she had reprimanded, and sent out to the roadside gate. "I am sorry, but I went out—outside to look—to see, to listen, and try to hear—ah, those poor people!—I *could* not stay within!"

The last of the wrecked visitors were being ushered in by Mrs. Merton through the hospitably open rear door, and, under cover of the bustle of their entrance, and the kindly greetings of Brenda and Valentine, Marthe the maid twitched her arm from beneath Sarita's trembling hand, and said in a spiteful little half-whisper:

"Been outside—to see, to listen, indeed! I'd like to find the place where you stood! I 'spose it didn't rain *there?*" and she caught at Sarita's sleeve.

It was quite true that the rain was still pouring, and that the entering refugees were dripping forlornly, but Sarita's garments were a trifle damp, and nothing more.

. . . . . .

The morning that followed this night of tempest, and death, and destruction, dawned clear and bright, and Beechwood, so wakeful, so busy during the hours of darkness, seemed a house of silence when the sun awoke, in spite of the number, sleeping, for the most part, beneath its roof. But Brenda Deering was early astir, and, having assured herself that her husband was sleeping quietly, she went below and out upon the eastern terrace, where, to her surprise, she encountered Brook Deering. He was leaning against a slender pillar of the portico, and he looked pale and languid, but he started forward with his old smile and quick word of welcome, and put out his hand.

"I did not find you in your bower last night, lady fair, and hardly hoped to do so when I learned that you were occupied in sheltering the storm-driven and wrecked. How miserable that my home-coming, which I have so anticipated, should be so attended! If I were superstitious I might think myself a bird of ill omen."

Brenda's answer was brief and her look serious, "I am glad to have met you so early, Brook," she said, looking about her the while; "have—have you seen anyone this morning?"

"Not a soul! I have not been here myself more than five minutes."

"And—last night—have you seen your old nurse, Brook?"

"Sarita! bless her brown face! No; and I'm ashamed that I went to bed and forgot to ask after her. Is—has anything happened to Sarita? Is she well? Is she here?"

"Yes," replied Brenda, turning hastily toward the house. "Yes, to all, and I wonder she has not come down before now; she is an early riser, still. But come in, Brook, come to my *boudoir*, I want to tell you something before you see—any of the others."

"I wonder," he said, as they crossed the wide hall toward the stairway, "if Nurse Sarita has heard that I am here?"

At the foot of the stairway, Brenda, who had hurried him forward in spite of his limp, turned and put a hand upon his arm. "I am hurrying you too much, Brook," she said apologetically, "but I want to get you upstairs before you meet with anyone, Sarita in particular; you know how she will chatter, and then, the others will be stirring soon. Sarita was very nervous last night, owing to the storm and the accident, and, in the excitement, she somehow missed you; no one happened to see you enter. Mrs. Merton tells me the hall was quite deserted, and she only chanced out from the kitchen just as you passed the arch."

"Then she can't know I am here?"

"Hardly." She pushed open the door of the *boudoir*. "I suppose you mean Sarita? Go in, Brook, I will join you in a moment." As he entered, she closed the door after him and went on quickly to the door of her chamber, which opened upon the hall, entering there, and, in a moment, coming into the *boudoir* by another communicating door. She held some loose papers in her hand, and came straight toward him where he sat in a low broad chair near an open window, out of which he was looking with eager interest.

"Brook," she began, coming close, and now making no effort to conceal the anxiety in her face, "we must lose no time; what I have to say is serious. Tell me, have you had any recent news from Pomfret? Have you, on the train, on the road, anywhere heard what has happened here among us?"

He started, and then sank back in his chair, a spasm of pain crossing his face. "Brenda, good heavens! what *do* you mean? I have seen no one, heard nothing. What is it?—tell me! Is any one—of our friends—dead—or—*what is it?*"

"Someone is dead. Yes. Murdered! Brook, you must be calm, and prepare to hear sad news. Bruce is in deep trouble."

"Bruce! Dear old fellow! What a beast I am to have forgotten him for a moment! Where is he? What is it?"

She laid the packet of papers upon the little reading-stand near the window, and pushed it toward him.

"You will find the hateful story there," she said; "read it, and do not forget that there are people all about us; even in the next room some children are sleeping." She turned away and seated herself wearily near another window, letting her head rest upon her hand, but keeping her eyes upon his face as he read. She saw the start and shock with which he read the announcement of Joe Matchin's murder, the incredulity and horror, as he read on, merging into indignation, scorn, and anger. In the papers under his hand the hateful story was all set forth with the usual incisive heartlessness of the newspaper report, and, when he had read them all, they slid from his hands to the floor, and, pallid and trembling, he got upon his feet, saying, with a choke in his throat:

"Brenda—it is monstrous! I—I must go to Bruce—at once!"

As he turned from the window, Brenda sprang toward him.

"Sit down, Brook!" she commanded. "Sit down and control yourself; we want your *help;* you—you must be strong, you must hear the rest, know what the evidence is, before you see Bruce, your father, anyone, outside this room."

"The *evidence!*" he gasped. "Is there anything more—worse than *this?*" pointing downward, and spurning the papers with his foot, to sink the next moment, with a groan, back into the cushioned chair, big drops of sweat standing out upon his forehead.

"Forgive me, Brenda," he said, after a moment, "don't—don't call anyone," for she had made a movement toward the door. "I—I don't mind the pain! I'll control myself, though it's awfully sudden—and—you must go on—you are right, I must hear it all, else how can I stand by Bruce!" He leaned back in the chair, and turned his face toward the window; then, after a moment, he sat erect before her, and said, quite calmly, "I am all right now. Tell me the rest, please."

For answer Brenda came and stood before him again, and held out to him the brooch with the amethyst and pearls forming the initials B. D. "Brook," she said, with her eyes upon his face, "look at *this.*"

He took it from her hand, and smiled faintly.

"Ah!" he said softly, "you have not parted with *that.*"

"No. And you?—Brook—have *you?*"

"Brenda! his tone was gently reproachful, "*your gift?*"

"You—you *have* it?"

For answer he put his hand to his breast, and, after a moment, drew from some inner pocket a small flat leathern case, and laid it open upon his knee. It contained some letters and papers, and at one end was a little box-like compartment, which opened under his finger; in this lay half-a-dozen uncut and unset gems, a tiny jewelled pin, a ring, and a gold button, set with amethyst, and with its pearl monogram matching the jewel she had put into his hand.

"I do not part with my keepsakes," he said, still reproachfully. "See, here is your button, Brenda, here is Valentine's little pin, and here—" he took up the ring and a diamond flashed in the light—"is another; *this*—" he put it back softly, "I may be obliged to return to its giver, the others—never, I trust!" And he smiled in her face an instant, becoming grave again as he asked, "What can this have to do with—with *this?*" glancing down at the papers.

"Much!" she replied. "A button *just like this,*" pointing to the amethyst, "was found upon the scene of the murder; near the body of Joe Matchin."

"My God! *My God!* Not his? Not—no! It had been stolen—or lost."

"Neither; Bruce has *his* button—as you have yours. Ah!"

As the words left her lips a quick knock sounded upon the door. It was Mrs. Merton in search of instructions, and Brenda did not hesitate. "I will come down at once," she said to the housekeeper, and, when that good woman had passed out of hearing, she turned in the doorway.

"I must go below, Brook. Now that you have been informed of all this, you are better prepared to meet your father; remember, you must not show excitement, or anger, in *his* presence, nor talk too much upon this subject in his hearing. He is far from strong, and the doctors all order, *insist* upon, the utmost possible quiet. When this blow fell we were greatly alarmed for him. But he bears it wonderfully. Still, we must be very cautious. Remember—let your father take the lead—and be careful."

He was still seated, and he now stooped and picked up one of the scattered papers.

"With your permission, Brenda, I will sit here a little longer and re-read these things; I want to understand this wretched business if I can."

"Very good," she replied. "When you are ready, go to your father; he breakfasts in his own rooms, and rises promptly at seven." She shut the door behind her and went down to her earliest risen guests.

Ten minutes later Brook Deering, still sitting by the window, heard another rap at the door of the *boudoir;* and in response to his "come in," a maid handed him a slip of paper upon which was written:

"Brook, I forgot to warn you to say nothing about the *button;* he knows nothing of that. Confine yourself to what you read in the printed columns. Destroy this. B——"

Not long after this, Doctor Felix Ware, passing through the lower hall saw a young man, pale and slender, but handsome and faultlessly dressed, come around the curve of the broad stairway, and encounter suddenly the woman Sarita, who was approaching briskly, and seemingly preoccupied.

"Sarita!" called the pale young man; and Doctor Felix heard her utter a sharp little cry, and saw her put out her hands and grasp at the one which the young man extended. "Why, nurse! Did I surprise you? Were you not told?" The woman made some indistinct reply, and some low spoken words were exchanged, Sarita seeming distinctly nervous, almost hysterical.

The greeting was soon over, and Sarita went hurriedly up the stairs, looking back with a strangely wistful face as the young man went limping toward the outer door.

Half-an-hour later Doctor Ware and Brook Deering met and were presented to each other at the breakfast table; they were only a party of three, Valentine being absent, looking, so Brenda explained, after the welfare of a young mother and two children, whom she had taken into her own rooms and under her own especial charge.

Brenda was full of anxiety; and, when the formalities of the table had been exchanged, she turned to Doctor Ware.

"Doctor—have you seen Mr. Deering this morning?"

"Yes. I have only just left him."

She turned inquiring eyes toward Brook. "And you?" she queried.

He shook his head. "I was told that the doctor was with him," he explained, "and did not think it best to intrude. "I told William to say that I would wait upon him after breakfast, if it suited him."

"He is anxious to see you," the doctor said. "I think you would better not delay your visit long. He is more nervous this morning than I have seen him since the day he came home. I must warn you against any prolonged talk, any excitement. You will pardon me. I am told that you were in the wreck, and your face tells its own story of fatigue, and possibly some little nervous shock. It would, I think, be well to make your own fatigued condition excuse for not prolonging any interviews you may hold with your father to-day."

Young Deering thanked him with the frank cordiality which so quickly won him friends among strangers, and they began to talk about the wreck, of which Brook could tell little.

"It was all so sudden," he said. "There was the quick wrench, the stop, the overthrow, and all in a moment. Then, in another moment, the crashing and rending of the timbers, the hiss of steam, groans, shrieks, yells; all around a struggling, horrible mass, and over everything the darkness—and the driving rain. I had been ill on shipboard, and again in New York, but I forgot that, and, for a little, tried to be of some use. But I found it impossible. I must have been dazed more than I knew, for at first I did not realise that I was so near my home, that a little more effort would bring me here."

"Yes," assented Brenda. "No doubt you were dazed; that's how they *all* describe the first sensation;" and so the talk went on, until Brook Deering, pushing back his chair, declared his readiness to go at once to his father; "after which," he said to Doctor Ware, "I will turn myself over to you, doctor. I think I may need a very little patching up."

"Decidedly," replied the doctor. "I think you *do*."

"Doctor Ware," began Mrs. Deering when the door had closed behind the young man, "tell me, frankly and fully, has all this excitement, the storm, the wreck, and his son's sudden return, been an injury to my husband? Is he *much* worse?"

"Mrs. Deering, your husband, as I have said, is excited and nervous; there are also slight evidences of fever. He will need quiet and care for a few days. It is a 'set back,' but, honestly, I see in it *nothing more*. A week ago I assured you that I could see no reason why he should not then go on gaining steadily, if slowly, and eventually become once more a man in fair health. Not quite so strong perhaps as before this illness; but if he leads, as he surely will, a quiet life, temperate in all things, he may easily outlive many who, to-day, seem stronger than he. What I said then, I say now. The progress has been retarded a little, but no serious harm has been done. It seemed to me," he added, after a moment's pause, "that the son stands in need of caution as well as the father. Is he usually—naturally, strong? I see that he has not his father's temperament."

A look of surprise crossed Brenda's face, but she answered candidly, "I suppose he must be like his mother; I never knew her. Brook has a light and gay disposition, frank, as you see. I was startled somewhat at his manner of taking the ill news I had to tell him this morning, to prepare him for a talk with his father. I looked to hear him rage rather than seem so crushed under it."

"Indeed! I should take young Mr. Deering to be a person whose self-control was almost perfect."

"He is, instead, really impulsive, quick to anger, and as ready to forgive."

"Mrs. Deering," questioned he gravely, "are you a student of human nature? Do you believe that the human countenance, the head, can and does reveal all that a man is, and much that he does or may do?"

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "you are a physiognomist; a phrenologist, perhaps!"

"I am interested in the 'study of man by man,'" he smiled, "and I believe that therein lies one cure for much of the world's evil; what we are or may be is stamped upon our outward person, and because we cannot, or will not, read the handwriting of Nature, we are stumbling through this life deceived, disappointed, betrayed, strangers to those nearest us; oftentimes unable, when we most need the light, to distinguish between our friends and our foes, and yet we were not created to be mysteries one to another; not meant, I believe, to go through the world like maskers. For those who have learned the language, what a man *is* is written all over him."

"Doctor, do you believe this?" she cried, with eager earnestness.

"I do! And more and more the deeper I look into it."

"And—you can read—character—faces?"

"A little, and after a groping fashion, perhaps."

There was a sound at the door of the breakfast room, and Brenda arose quickly.

"I am interested more than you can think," she said earnestly. "If *I* possessed this power I might—" she checked herself suddenly, and seemed to force down the eagerness from face and voice. "Someone is coming," she said, in a half reluctant tone. "Another time, doctor, will you tell me more of this—this new science!"

"It's as old as the hills!" He got up, and they moved toward the door side by side. "At another time, Mrs. Deering, I shall be yours to command." He opened the door; Mrs. Merton stood without, a question upon her motherly lips, and two or three children, already made friends, at her heels; and Brenda resumed anew her duties of hostess and Good Samaritan.

But in spite of these duties, and despite the fact that the servants, like the rest of the household, were not yet recovered from the exertions of the previous night, she found time, before the sun was high, to write a hasty line to Bruce Deering, and to send it by a trusted messenger. It contained only these words:

"*Brook came last night. The other one is safe.*

B——"

CHAPTER XXVI.

BROOK OR BRUCE.

"Ah! I'm glad that is over! I dislike disagreeable things as much as ever, old man. And I need not tell *you* how wholly I am with you in sympathy, in everything—act, word, and deed. And there it is! If one could act; but this waiting! Why, boy, how can you be so calm? *I* should rage myself into lunacy! Bruce, are you *sure* that this queer whim of the governor's is for the best. Won't it make it harder for you?"

Brook and Bruce Deering were sitting face to face in the room of the latter, with only the width of the narrow writing-table between them. It was early afternoon of the day following Brook's return, yet immediately after luncheon, weary and crippled as he was, and looking pale, and far more anxious than Bruce himself, he had appeared at his cousin's door.

"I *couldn't* wait, old man!" these were his first words; "I *had* to come, and now let's take this devil that has come among us by the horns, and have done with him as much as you can! We can't be our old selves until we do!"

And so, for two long hours, they had talked, going over the ground of the Matchin murder, until all had been told Brook, and at the end, he had delivered himself of the foregoing.

"It seems to me," Brook went on, "that you ought to have kept that fellow; that you ought to have more—others of the same sort."

"So you know *that too?*"

Brook stared wide-eyed. "Why, man, the governor told me *that* first off. He was not able to tell a long story, and there was no need, Mamma Brenda had broken it to me—much of it, let me see the papers, and so on, this morning early. Then I went in to see the governor, and when I told him that Brenda had broken the ice, he seemed mightily relieved. I tell you, old man, you're as much a *son* to him this moment as *I* am! He could not be worse hurt if it were *me* in trouble instead of you. But say—I *can't* give it up so! There should be half-a-dozen picked men digging into this case! Say the word, Bruce, and I'll go to York to-morrow, limp and all, and—"

Bruce Deering threw out his hand in a gesture which stayed the rapid utterances of his cousin. "It's of no use, Brook! If Uncle Lys told you this you must see that there's a *strong* reason for it all. Now, let's drop this. It's useless to discuss it, and—to *me*—" he got up hastily and stretched out his sinewy arms. "Good heavens! how I wish I might forget it for only half-an-hour!"

Brook was silent for a long moment, then, "I can't help it," he broke out. "The governor did not hint at his reason for sending away a detective, whom he admits to be able, and likely, if given his head, to unravel this queer tangle; at least he only assigned his own state of health, and his inability to deal with exciting subjects, or attend to matters of business, however important; but *I* know, and *you* know, Bruce, that my father is not the man to consider *himself* in such a matter as *this.*

There's something else! I had almost said *someone else*, behind all this. Bruce," he hesitated a moment over his next words, "Brenda tells me that he knows nothing about the *button*."

"True!"

"And yet—" he got up suddenly and stood, erect and slender, before his taller and more stalwart cousin. "Bruce, there is something back of all this! It can't be the button business, since he does not know of it; besides, what if it were? A button, you say, was found near the scene of—of the murder, a button such as was once given to each of us—one to each. Both of us still possess our own; the other—" He stopped short; Bruce, too, had risen, and the look of his eye checked the speaker.

"Drop it, Brook; don't you *see* that since Uncle Lys knows nothing of this there *must* be another reason? If *I* have submitted, *you* should be willing to drop this. What I owe to my uncle surely *you* owe to your father!"

Brook Deering caught his breath sharply, and drew back with a strange look of horror upon his face. Merciful heaven!" he ejaculated, his blue eyes widening as with the horror of some sudden hateful thought, "can it be *possible?* And yet—oh yes—it *must* have been a strong reason, a terrible reason that could drive my father to such a step! And to think it should be *you* who must be the one accused—to think—"

"Stop!" Bruce Deering had caught his arm, and the word was uttered in a tone Brook knew of old. "Brook, never utter such words—never *think* them—what your father has chosen to do, that *you* can do, safely and with dignity. Lysander Deering has decided that it *must* not be through *us* that the riddle is solved. If it is enough for me, let it be for you. Suspect *me* if you will, but *stop* there! And now I say once more enough. This subject *must not* be again mentioned between us!"

Brook stared at him for a long moment like one confounded. Then he made an impulsive forward movement, "Old man," he cried, putting out his hand, "when did I *not* declare my own will, and then yield to *yours?* I never meant to anger you! How could I understand? How *can* I now? But I can hold my peace! for your sake, and for my father's—"

"For your *own*;—add that!" said the other almost with a sneer.

"For—for my *own*. Are we not all Deering's? Bruce, we almost quarrelled at parting, let us not begin afresh! Allow for the newness, the shock of all this, and be sure neither my father nor you need fear to trust me. From this moment—upon this subject, *my* tongue is tied—the next word must come from *you!*"

"Do you mean—"

"I mean that my father said to me last night, as you have said but now—'Nothing can be done, nothing more need be said; *let us not speak of this again.*'"

"Believe me," sighed Bruce, resuming his seat, "it is better so. Sit down, Brook, and let us speak of other things."

But they did not speak, not for many long minutes. Instead, Brook

sat with eyes bent upon the floor, and seemingly lost in thought, while his cousin sat in an attitude, and with a look of waiting.

It was Brook who broke the silence.

"When we parted, Bruce," he began with some hesitation, "there was a question upon which we differed first, to agree afterward. Is THAT tabooed? or may I speak of it?" A smile was now lurking at the corner of his mouth, but Bruce replied gravely:

"Why not? The probation is at an end. And, for me, all else, where Miss Rodney is concerned, is at an end. Am I in a position to address a woman, do you think? There is a lion in *my* path, but if *your* way is clear, go on, the path is open to you."

And now the other was grave also.

"Bruce," he remonstrated, "don't address me as if I were the most selfish fellow in the world! I own you have had some reason to think so, but there are two years between now and then! When I declared to you my love for Valentine Rodney, and accused you of trying to win her when she was but a child, too young to know her own mind or to judge between us, I was selfish, and a noodle beside; and when you told me that you would agree with me to wait two years, leaving her free meantime, and, at the end of that time, I should have the same chance, an equal chance, with the added privilege of first addressing her, you shamed me. For your chance, then, *was* best, and might have remained so. And *now* you stand aside and bid me go on! Do you *mean* it? Have you ceased to *care?*" Their eyes met.

"You have known me twenty-four years, Brook Deering! Tell me, am I a man to change?"

"*No!* And now I understand. I know what I must do! Let us be frank, Bruce!—frank as we were two years ago! Tell me, what do you mean to do?"

Bruce Deering threw back his head. "I intend to be a free man some day! I expect that this cloud hanging above me will break! If it does—*when* it does—and I stand vindicated before her, *then*, if Valentine Rodney is alive *and free*, I shall dare my fate! And you?"

"I shall *wait with you* for that day to come! as *you* have waited for my return from Europe! *When it comes*, and we stand upon an equal footing, I shall *tempt my fate* also."

"Brook—I do no ask that!"

"Bruce, I *could* not do otherwise without being a scoundrel—and *you know it.*"

. . . . . .

The second day, after Brook Deering's return, saw Beechwood restored to its normal condition. The guests of the storm and wreck had gone their various ways, helped where help was needed, cheered and comforted all; and on the third day Doctor Ware also bade them adieu, promising to return promptly if the invalid should need and call him.

The dinner, on the evening of his departure, was a very quiet one. Valentine, who had given every moment of her waking hours to the waifs, ministering zealously to the nerve-racked women, entertaining

the children, and writing letters to various anxious and far-away friends, was unusually quiet. Mr. Deering was preoccupied, and Brook and Brenda supported each other as best they could, and kept the ball of conversation rolling with some pains. Brook was still lame, and his pallor and langour were yet noticeable."

When dinner was over, both Brook and Valentine excused themselves, each pleading fatigue; and when they had gone, Mr. Deering took his wife's arm.

"Come to my den, Princess, this is our opportunity, and I have a few words for your two small ears, and none other's."

When they were seated, he, near his desk, which was a curious combination of desk and safe in one, he began to talk of business matters, of the affairs of the bank, and of other investments of real estate in Pomfret and elsewhere.

"I have been looking into my business," he explained, with an affectionate smile, "with a view to the transfer of some of my affairs to your shoulders. The doctor—advises me to get rid of these things as much as may be, and I am to be for a greater or less period, the slave of the doctors; so I have thought it well to let you see into matters. And now, my princess, while I do not apprehend, nor fear, anything more serious than my present state, still, I am an old man, and mortal."

"Oh, my *dear!*"

"Yes, yes! Sixty-seven. Madam Deering, you are the oft-quoted old man's darling, do not try to blink the fact; and old men should set their affairs in order; so I have even made my will, and placed it in safe hands, and, should it become needful, or *when* it becomes needful, you are to apply to my good friend, Elias Baird, and, after him, to John Redding, whom I have chosen for my attorney, and for yours after me. Most of my papers of value are in Baird's hands, but," — here he wheeled about in his chair, and took from the desk near him a bulky document in a sealed envelope and laid it in her lap. "*This*, my dear wife," he went on, "you are to retain *unopened* until after my will has been read. Wills, you know, are not *always* satisfactory to all parties concerned therein, and, while I may not apprehend any trouble, any revolt, or questioning, I have written what is herein contained, so that, in case either Brook or Bruce Deering attempt to dispute, question, or quarrel with my will, or *in any way* seek to make you trouble or cause you annoyance, in such case, and only in such case, you are to open this paper, read what it contains, and *act* upon its instructions. Take it, wife, it will be best and safest in your care. And now, let us rest, and sleep, if we may. Don't let this talk of mine cause you uneasiness, dear; the doctor assures me that all is going well with me, and that it rests with myself whether I will be quiet and indolent, and grow strong, or fussy and over-active, and be an invalid. I intend to be guided by him, wife, and by you."

. . . . . .

It was on the night of Tuesday, June the fourteenth, that Brenda Deering, a tear in her eye and a soft half smile upon her lip, put this big envelope, with its many seals and its bulky contents, away in a drawer of her own writing-desk, and turned the key upon it.

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It was on Sunday night, five days later, that Doctor Felix Ware, in his New York office, where he sat reading late, received and read with sorrow and amazement, this telegraphic message :

"*Come at once ; Mr. Deering is dying!*"

"Something has *happened!*" muttered the doctor as he began his hasty preparations for the journey. "There was neither threat nor promise of *this* when I left him five days ago. *Something has happened!* I think—" he crossed the room, and opening the door of a case, containing certain peculiar-looking instruments of surgery, pondered a moment. "Yes, I *will!* I'll go *prepared for an emergency.*"

CHAPTER XXVII.

POISON.

"MRS. DEERING, can you bear to hear something—something worse even than this present grief?"

"*Worse!*" Brenda Deering, pallid and sad-eyed, looked up at the speaker wonderingly ; "what *can* be worse than my husband's death, to *me*, who am left so utterly alone,—at such a time?"

"Ah ! truly, it *is sad!* terribly sad ! And yet I must open your eyes to worse horrors. God knows I would soften the blow if I *could.* At least I can say this, I came here as your husband's friend; he trusted me—"

"I know !"

"And *now* I say to you, let me stay, so long as I can serve you, so long as I am needed, as *your* friend also. Let me help *you* ; and pray feel, if you can, that you are not alone. In the ordeal before you, use me—command me, to the uttermost."

"The ordeal ! What—what is it? Bruce—"

"It is not Bruce, Mrs. Deering. Oh ! I *cannot* prepare you ! I must speak the brutal truth ! Your husband *died of poison!*"

Small wonder that Brenda Deering fell beneath this blow, and that, for a long hour, she lay stricken, dazed, silent, and strengthless, in her darkened room, with Valentine and Mrs. Merton watching beside her, with her maid upon guard at the outer door of the apartment, and with Doctor Ware pacing the hall beyond, waiting for what he knew must come.

It came soon. Valentine opened the outer door and beckoned him.

"She is better," the girl whispered ; "she is in her *boudoir*, and wishes to see you alone ; she has not spoken except to express this wish, and she looks as pale as death. Doctor, *what is it?*"

"I can answer you better, Miss Rodney, when I have seen her," he replied gravely. "Will you, and Mrs. Merton also, remain within call? I do not *think* she will faint again, but she has received a terrible shock," and he entered the *boudoir.*

Brenda did not stir from the low chair on which she reclined, with

her face in shadow, and she began to speak at once, in a strange, controlled tone, which grew stronger as she talked on.

"Tell me—what you can."

He drew a chair near her own, and replied in a hushed tone, as he seated himself,—

"It is very little. Upon coming yesterday, I saw at once that there was no hope, and I was greatly surprised at the symptoms. He only lived, as you know, a little more than an hour. I knew, I was certain, while he breathed his last, that his life had been tampered with, and I thought it terribly unfortunate that Doctor Liscom was out of town. Do not start; his presence could not have helped or hindered. As soon as he came, I took him into the library and told him what, I felt sure, was the truth. At first he could not believe it; but he was soon and sadly convinced. There is nothing more to be said *now*, Mrs. Deering. As physicians, familiar with the poison's symptoms, we are both *morally* certain that Mr. Deering's life has been shortened by poison, and I have come to you to ask, that you allow us to take the steps necessary to obtain the *legal* proof; meantime, of course, no one except yourself has been given a hint of this. What shall be done, and whether this shall be made known, or withheld, we have decided to leave with *you*."

She made no movement, but he could see her hands grip the arms of her chair as if in restraint or for support, as she asked slowly:

"You—you are *sure*—both of you—that it *is*—poison?"

"*Sure!* Only *too sure!*" he sadly answered.

"And—do you think—could it have been—in any way—an accident or mistake?"

"If our theory is correct, *one* mistake, which might have been possible—*barely* possible—one dose, wrongly given, *could not* have produced the conditions which we believe to exist."

"Then—you suspect—*murder?*"

"If we find our suspicions verified, it can be nothing less than that—unless—"

She stopped him with a swift gesture.

"Murder *may* be possible—*suicide* NEVER!"

"I quite agree with you! Mrs. Deering, time is of value, tell me your commands, and pardon my haste."

"Doctor Ware," her tone was firmer now, and sounded almost stern, "in such a case as you suppose, *can* there be *two* ways?"

"There is—of course, much to be considered, and—"

"There is *nothing* to be considered!" she broke in. "If you prove what you believe, nothing but justice;" she leaned toward him, and the strong spirit of the woman began to reveal itself through her fine eyes. "If Lysander Deering, in his own house, his own bed, among his *friends*, has been foully dealt with, there is *but one course* left for us. Justice! Vengeance!"

"Then you consent—"

"I *desire* you to ascertain the truth *at once*. To make the result known to *me first*—and then—then you must advise me!" As he arose she put out her hand again. "One thing more. No one must *suspect* what you are about to do." He turned toward the door, and,

as he laid his hand upon the latch, she spoke yet again. "Doctor, I think you *must* help me! I cannot break down! I must be strong, and not waste your time by any weakness on my part. Can you strengthen me in body and nerves?"

"I will send you something at once," he replied, and went out in evident haste.

Ten minutes later Brenda's maid brought, and dealt out to her, the desired tonic, and, when she had swallowed it, she shut herself up alone in her room again, bidding her maid deny her, even to Valentine.

For two hours the big splendid house, with its closed and darkened rooms, was as quiet as if all the life beneath its roof had gone out, like that of its kindly master, to meet the eternal mysteries; but only to him was the silence peaceful. Brenda, alone with the great horror which made the natural sorrow of an hour before seem a comfort in comparison, was fighting for strength: striving for self-mastery, struggling with doubts and fears unutterable. Valentine, ignorant of the worst, yet sorely grieving over the loss of so dear a friend, so kind a guardian, sat beside her window, thinking sadly, and with tear-dimmed eyes. And in another room, darkened and closed to all without, the son of the house, and the nephew, who had also held a son's place in the heart and the home of the man lying so silent below, were together, sharing the heaviness and sorrow which had fallen upon Beechwood. Brook Deering lay upon a couch, his face showing white and drawn in the dim light, and, not far from him sat Bruce Deering with his head bowed upon his hand, and his face more sorrow-smitten than it had been in the worst moment of his own trial and danger. Both were, and had long been, silent; and both were thinking, sadly, strangely, and yet, with a difference.

Even in the room where the dead man lay, and where the two physicians were so sadly, strangely occupied, there was not a sound that could be heard outside the door, where, from time to time, a silent flitting figure passed, seemed to listen, and fluttered away, only to return again and again.

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For two weary hours Brenda Deering, in her closed *boudoir*, made no sign, much to the anxiety of the maid who waited, forlornly, in the stillness of the dressing-room. But at the end of that time the little bell which connected *boudoir* and dressing-room tinkled softly. To the nervous woman in waiting it seemed to clang, and she hastened to her mistress.

"Has anyone asked for me?" queried Brenda.

"No, madam."

"Very well. When Doctor Ware inquires for me, tell him I wish also to see Doctor Liscom—both together."

"Yes, madam."

"Is Miss Rodney still in her room?"

"I think so."

"And the gentlemen?"

"They have not appeared, but their light has burned all night."

"Ah! Close the door, Judith, and draw up the curtain of that south window. Then you may bring me a cup of coffee, and tell

Mrs. Merton to have breakfast ready to serve as soon as anyone appears."

As the girl crossed the room, she stole a surprised and anxious glance at the face of her mistress. Brenda Deering's face would have startled a less observing and interested person than faithful Judith, so pale it was, and set in lines that were stern and cold, almost to rigidity. In the two hours just passed, alone with a horror greater than anyone could know, Brenda Deering had discovered within herself, dormant, but strong when shocked into action, a new element, a power which held her calm, set her heart to beating strong and full, cleared her mind of its doubts and tremors, controlled her every nerve, aroused her will, and made it a dominating power.

And so, a few moments later, the two physicians found her, and, after one glance at her face, exchanged looks which were eloquent. They had feared an outbreak, woe following upon horror, and here, instead, stood a woman, pallid, 'tis true, but calm and firm, and ready to meet their eyes, and to anticipate the verdict they dreaded to pronounce.

"I see," she said, in steady tones, rising from her place near a darkened east window, as Judith closed the door behind them, "it is as you feared?"

Again the two men exchanged quick glances, which she as quickly intercepted.

"Do not fear to be frank with me," she went on; "I have quite prepared myself, and there will be no scene here. Tell me all—at once!"

"It *is* as we feared, Mrs. Deering. There is ample proof of poison, in quantities so large that they must have been given in several doses, four or five, at least. Mr. Deering's disease *alone* was not sufficient—"

"One moment!" It was Doctor Ware who had spoken, and she interrupted him with something like impatience in voice and gesture. "Tell me in the fewest words, did my husband *die of his disease or by poison—which?*"

"Your husband, Mrs. Deering, was prostrated by the excitement which began with the murder of Joe Matchin, and ended with the railway accident, with its attendant circumstances. That prostration would have been a serious one, I *think*, and might have resulted, *later*, in his death,—but—were it not for repeated doses of the poison, he would be living *now*."

"Then—he *was—murdered?*" She turned from one to the other. "You *believe* this? both of you?"

"Yes," replied Doctor Ware, with decision.

"Unhappily, Mrs. Deering," added Liscom, "the evidence is but too plain."

She turned and went slowly back to the darkened window, where two seats were drawn near to her own.

"Will you sit here, gentlemen?" she said in a voice strangely tame and unlike her own; and, when they had placed themselves, she resumed in the same strange, low tone, "I accept the service you have offered, Doctor Ware, and I beg, Doctor Liscom, that you, too, will help me with your advice, perhaps your aid. You are the first, the *only* ones to discover this? am I right?"

"It has not passed our lips," replied the younger man.

"And you two have been—been there with the dead—have you learned anything that I do not know? Have you found—a—cause for suspicion—a clue."

"None."

"None."

"*Have* you, then, any *reason* for a suspicion?" she persisted, still in that calm, dull, unfamiliar tone.

"None."

"None whatever!"

"And yet—for there has been *no stranger* in that sick room—under *this roof* we must look for *his murderer*." Her words sounded as if forced from between her lips; there was an awful unnatural bitterness in their sound. The thought was not, could not have been new to either, though it had not been spoken between them, but it caused them both a thrill of horror, falling as it did from her pallid lips.

"Tell me," she demanded, her tone cold and firm again, "how must I begin? Doctor Liscom, you, I know, have other duties, but I ask you to give me all the aid you can, and you, Doctor Ware, will you stay here and give me your help as you would have given it to *him?* Dare I take you at your word?"

"Mrs. Deering," said the young man, "Doctor Liscom is the man whose *name* should be known as your adviser and helper in this matter. As for *me*, you have only to command. I am at your service, and his."

"Thank you," she murmured. "I understand—you are right. Now, tell me *what* is the first thing to be done?"

"I think," said the young man, after a moment's hesitancy and waiting—"I think, first, you should decide how best to discover the truth. And shall the facts be made known, or—shall they be kept from the public?—Will you make your search openly or in secret?"

Her answer came quickly. "Let it be kept from the public if possible! But—I *cannot* carry this burden alone! Valentine must know, and Mr. Baird!"

Doctor Liscom looked up quickly. He had been pondering with bent head and wrinkled brow. "I would suggest another," he said. "We cannot have too many clear heads—and *cool* heads. I suggest John Redding."

Brenda turned towards Doctor Ware a look of inquiry. "He is a young lawyer," she explained. "My husband—thought well of him."

"He is a bright fellow," added the elder man. "By the way, Mrs. Deering, is Ingram still away?"

"I believe so."

"And is he still Mr. Deering's attorney?"

"No." Again she addressed herself in explanation to the young physician. "Mr. Ingram, Doctor Ware, is an old man, retired from active practice for several years. He has been, for a long time, my husband's legal adviser in all things, and he remained such long after he had given up his regular practice, but that was changed, not long since."

"Changed?" ejaculated Doctor Liscom.

"Yes. Changed soon after we went to New York. The new arrangement was made there, in fact. You may remember, doctor, that Mr. Ingram went to the city with us?"

"Yes, now that I recall it, he *did*."

"It seemed a little strange to me then, and I do not really understand it now. It was to effect this change that he went with us to the city. Mr. Redding followed us a few days later, and the three were together much of the time, for the week that followed. Mr. Deering explained to me, as a reason for the change, Mr. Ingram's increasing age and ill health, his desire for perfect freedom, and his purpose to travel for some time. I was desired to keep as a secret, the fact that there had been a change in my husband's business relations, and, somehow, I received the impression that it was more because of a whim or fancy of Mr. Ingram's—a reluctance, on his part, to let it become known, in Pomfret, that he had been obliged to abandon business altogether."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Doctor Liscom, "I see, yes. That is characteristic of Ingram! He was a queer man, and a shrewd. Then, of course, you will *wish* to include Redding?"

"I thank you for suggesting it." She put a hand to her head, "I fear my head is not so clear as I thought. Yes, let us have them all as soon as possible: Mr. Baird, Mr. Redding, and Valentine—"

"And—the young men?" suggested Doctor Liscom.

"Ah! I don't know—Brook—you know Brook, Doctor Liscom? How easily he becomes excited. He has not been strong, nor well, since the accident; and his father's death has quite broken him down. As for Bruce, I don't think we can get him away from his cousin. Brook will *not* be alone when he is ill—ah!"

There was a quick knock, followed by the opening of the door just a hair's breadth, or enough to admit a voice, the voice of Sarita. "Mrs. Deering! Madam!—If you will come *one moment;*" the voice was agitated, anxious.

Brenda went quickly to the door: "One moment," she echoed, and went out, with only a backward glance.

Sarita stood outside the door with starting eyes, and hands clutching at each other nervously.

"Madam!" she cried, "do come to Master Brook! He—he—I think he must be *going mad!*"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DESPAIR.

DOCTOR FELIX WARE watched the form of Brenda Deering until it had disappeared and the door had closed behind it, then he turned quickly to his *confrère*.

"What is this about young Deering?" he asked crisply. "The *invalid*, I mean?"

The other glanced toward the door in his turn, and answered, with his eyes still upon it and in a cautiously lowered voice—

"The young fellow is not what you can call an *invalid*, not ordinarily. He seems to have reached home a little upset, and he was never quite so big and robust as his cousin. But the poor boy is always the cause of great anxiety among his friends whenever anything like this occurs. You heard what she said about his *excitement?* The boy is said to inherit his dead mother's temperament. He's quick, sympathetic, nervous, and excitable, and behind all this there lurks *a curse.*"

During the greater part of this speech, Doctor Ware,—himself a stalwart and fine specimen of well-disciplined and strong-willed manhood—had listened with a look which seemed almost cynical. At the last phrase his face changed suddenly, and became almost stern.

"Explain!" he urged, quickly.

"Without knowing the truth, until it was too late, Lysander Deering married a woman in whose veins ran a current of inherited insanity."

"Good heavens!"

"And, although it is not generally known in Pomfret, for she died abroad, *she died insane.*"

"I see! I understand. And Mrs. Deering fears—" he broke off abruptly, as, with yet more abruptness, the door was flung open and Sarita almost fell across the threshold.

"Gentlemen!" she gasped, "come, *please!* Come quickly! Master Brook—madam wishes—ah, come, *come!*"

The door was wide open as they approached Brook Deering's chamber, and the tableau that met their gaze startled them before a word was uttered, so strange, so varied, and so full of force and meaning were the looks which, for the moment, seemed stamped upon the faces of the three inmates.

In the middle of the large and brightly luxurious room stood Mrs. Deering, her form drawn to its fullest height, her head thrown back, and her hand outstretched, palm outward; the attitude, the gesture, were those of scorn and repulsion, but the *look* upon the white face was that of sudden awful horror. Standing beside a window, at equal distance from both the others, and with his arm still uplifted, his fingers still gripped upon the curtain he had just been in the act of raising, was Bruce Deering, and the horror upon Brenda's face was reflected in his —the horror, and something else, which neither could interpret.

And upon the couch drawn out opposite a window, that its occupant might feel the breath from the rose garden without, half-crouching, half-reclining, was Brook Deering; one hand was clutching, with constantly writhing fingers, at his throat, where the collar of the low, loose *négligé* garment he wore was already torn open as if by a reckless hand, the other one shaking, but outstretched, pointed toward Brenda Deering; his face was flushed redly from throat to forehead, and two blue eyes burned and blazed as the writhing lips caught, and held back, the words, but half uttered, and checked by a sudden effort at the command of a stronger will.

They had heard him as they approached speaking gaspingly,

incoherently—meaninglessly for them; and then two words, neither meaningless nor incoherent, checked his utterance as they appeared:

"*Be silent!*"

It was Bruce who had thus spoken, and as they paused at the threshold he released his unconscious hold upon the curtain, and moved toward them.

But it was Brenda who spoke, the look upon her face, which had rested there but a moment, vanishing, as she turned with a splendid gesture, which at once invited them to enter, and indicated to them the object of their visit.

"Gentlemen, come in, and kindly tell this overwrought young man the *truth* concerning your work downstairs. In some way, in spite of our precaution, the servants have caught some wild idea, which has been made known to him."

While she spoke, Bruce, moving behind them, had quietly closed the door; and as she ceased, Brook Deering flung aside his light covering and struggled to his feet, putting out imploring hands to the elder physician.

"Doctor," he gasped, "for heaven's sake *tell* me, is this devilish thing true? *Why—where* was the need for this horror of secrecy? *Why* have you tampered with my father's sacred body? Tell me—tell me there was *no need?*"

Suddenly, as Doctor Liscom paused for an instant, startled by his vehemence, and at a loss for soothing and yet truthful words, Felix Ware moved quickly forward, caught the two outstretched hands in his own, and fastening his own clear, grey orbs upon the burning eyes of the other, said, slowly and with calm impressiveness:

"We are ready to tell you all that you can hear and bear like a *man;* we have been reserved only to spare you. Both of us, Doctor Liscom and I, loved and revered the man whose body lies below. No hands could touch him with more reverence; none *have* touched him needlessly."

As the last words were spoken, and with the hands of the young physician still holding his own, and guiding thus his movements with deliberate but gentle firmness, Brook sank back upon the couch, and Doctor Ware, with one hand still upon his arm, sat quietly down beside him.

"Shall I finish?" Ware asked quietly.

"Yes, *finish!* There was nothing?—*tell* me there *was nothing?*"

"I cannot. The man sleeping down there might have been one of us now but for the crime of some monster. Mr. Deering died by *poison.*"

"*God of Heaven!*" There was a crash like the fall of one stricken by lightning, and Bruce Deering, standing near the door, and almost behind Doctor Liscom and Brenda, quite forgotten for the moment by both, had fallen like a log.

Instantly Doctor Ware was at his side kneeling above him.

"It's a dead faint," he said sharply. "Doctor, will *you* attend to—the other? Mrs. Deering, please ring for a man, and for water." As he spoke he lifted one limp hand and held it in his, while he looked

over his shoulder toward the couch where Brook Deering, his face hidden by his arms, was moaning and writhing, unheeding the bending form and pitying face of Doctor Liscom, and deaf to his words.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE INVALID'S COMMANDS.

THE shock which, in spite of his vigorous manhood, had so suddenly prostrated Bruce Deering, could not long hold him in its thrall. He rallied soon, and, but for the set lips and sombre eyes, was much the same quiet, self-controlled, unreadable Bruce Deering, who had stood up erect and seemingly unshaken by the awful charges against him, and the dangers by which he was menaced, and which day by day were drawing nearer. But he was *not* the same, and they who knew him best could mark the change.

Brenda saw it, and said—to herself—"*This* has been a heavier blow, a greater shock to Bruce, than was the *other*. He was not affected by his own trouble and danger, as he is by—*this!*"

Valentine saw it and said in the depths of her heart, "How much more will he bear without flinching—and—*alone?*"

And Mr. Baird saw it and said, aloud, and at the very beginning of the first council held between himself, John Redding, Doctors Liscom and Ware, "Bruce Deering's face never looked so set, stern, and full of the grim force that is in him, as he looks *now*. His *own* troubles never shook him as does this! And—"

"You are *right!*" John Redding declared with emphasis. "He was willing, you say, to let the inquiry in his *own* case drop; and to see the detective, who might have vindicated him, discharged, and the case fall flat. But he won't let this matter rest, depend upon *that!* I don't believe he has given a *thought* to his own affairs, since he learned the truth concerning his uncle's death!"

But Brook Deering did not rally so quickly; he shut himself up, and for a time refused to see a physician; at last he would receive Liscom, and no other.

The doctor's report was most unsatisfactory.

"The poor boy seems dazed," he had said to Brenda, who with Bruce and Doctor Ware together awaited his verdict. "He talks queerly and seems hardly to realise the case—or the horror of it; is not quite himself, in fact. It may need only a short course of sedatives to quiet him and bring him out all right, but I should say, *decidedly*, that he has not been a well man for some time. This trouble, coming suddenly as it has, does not altogether account for his present state."

"That," broke in Brenda, "is just what Doctor Ware has said."

"Ware was right, and you are fortunate to have him among you just now. But Brook has just taken another whim, if I may call it such. He has tired of his solitude, and he wants you, Bruce, to stay with him."

Bruce and Brenda exchanged quick glances. "What do you advise?" the former inquired.

"If it will not tax you too much, I think he should not be much alone; and it won't do, I fear, to force anyone upon him who is unwelcome or strange."

"It couldn't be done!" declared Bruce. "I *know* that! And, if it will be best, I am ready to bear him company for a few days or a week."

"I hope he will be quite himself before that."

"Quite *himself!*" Brenda started forward and laid a hand upon his arm. "Doctor, do you see—do you think there is any danger—danger to his mind?"

"Oh, I hope not, I *hope* not—you see—"

But now it was Bruce who broke in.

"You speak of his condition prior to his arrival here; his illness on shipboard and in New York; tell us, do you think he may have had a touch, the *faintest taint*, of his mother's horrible affliction, *previous to his coming home?*"

"Really! I hope not. Oh, I hardly—and still—" he checked himself, evidently he was troubled.

"It *might* have been!" broke in Bruce. "Is that what you were about to say? Doctor, tell us! *Is* such a thing *possible?*"

"It is possible—yes, but not likely. I think—unless—unless he may have been mentally troubled in some manner unknown to us, *seriously* troubled."

"Ah!" Brenda's start was almost violent, but the doctor went on: "I must ask you, right here, if Brook knows of the taint in his mother's blood?"

"No," replied Bruce and Brenda at once; and Bruce went on:

"It was not known to me until we were about setting out for school, and then, it was not my uncle who told me. At almost the last moment Sarita came to me and, after swearing me to secrecy, told me how my poor aunt died, and begged me to look closely after my cousin, *because* of this hidden danger, of which *he* was ignorant, and she added that my uncle fancied it would be best that he did not know of it, owing to his sensitive, nervous temperament, and that she had been forbidden to tell of it. You see," turning to Doctor Ware, who, thus far, had taken no part in the conversation, while listening with keen interest, "Sarita was his nurse from infancy, and is much attached to him."

Doctor Ware nodded and opened his lips for the first time, turning and addressing Brenda.

"And—did your husband ever mention this subject to *you*, Mrs. Deering?"

"Never in connection with *his son*. He told me, at the time of our marriage, and in a very few words, some of the circumstances of his former marriage, and also that his wife died abroad, and insane. The subject was never renewed between us. It was Mrs. Merton, who has lived in the Deering family, from her youth up, nearly all of the time, who told me that the poor lady's madness was inherited, and that it seldom lay dormant for long."

There was a moment of silence, then the elder physician turned toward the younger.

"Ware," he said, "you have been a pupil of Brandreth, who is second to none in the knowledge, and cure, of the insane. What is *your* opinion of this case?"

"Before we can judge fairly there are two things to be learned. First, you think, all of you, that the young man is *not* aware of the possible taint in his blood. Or—wait—who in this house would be best able to speak upon this question *with authority?*—Would it be, do you think, his old nurse?"

"Yes—yes," said first Brenda and then Bruce.

"Next, we must learn, if possible, if the patient *has* had a touch, ever so slight, of the old malady, even the *least* aberration. Mr. Deering, he has called for *you*. Do you think you might—learn the truth, in some way, from *him?*"

"I am willing to try," answered Bruce.

"Then, if you find that there has been *no* mental derangement; or if you find that it has occurred, but has been slight, and, if we also are sure that he is *not* aware of his sad inheritance, I should feel quite certain that he would, with proper treatment, recover soon, and be able to take a part in our councils; and his cure ought to be a matter of a few days only. And now—may we question this nurse? Not to alarm her unnecessarily, some one of us would best see her alone."

"Let it be *you*," said Brenda promptly. And so it was that, a few moments later, Sarita, somewhat surprised and wondering much, came into Doctor Ware's presence in the little morning-room, where he sat alone.

The woman's face was anxious, and her manner nervous. The doctor wasted no words.

"I am told," he began mildly, "that you were Mr. Brook Deering's nurse in his infancy, and that you could tell me what I wish to know regarding him, his general health, and so on." He paused. The woman's thin lips were closed over her even white teeth; they seemed to draw themselves into yet thinner lines as he spoke, and did not open when he ceased speaking.

He smiled slightly, and his tone became quite confidential.

"You see," he resumed, "your young master was not exactly well, he tells me, when he set out for home, and the shock of the accident, naturally, set him back a little. And, while he was still weak, this blow—his father's death, has proved too much for him, and we *fear*—"

Sarita's lips opened suddenly, and in a shrill cry, "Oh! *Mon Dieu!* Is he really so bad? Is it *more* than the nerves then—*tell* me *quick?*"

"It is the nerves that we are anxious about. Listen. The young man has inherited a fearful malady, which *may* crop out at any time, if he should become too much worried; or may never trouble him if he is guarded against certain shocks."

A change had crossed the woman's face; her eyes, which constantly glanced from point to point, and seldom rested for more than an instant upon the speaker's face, had lost their strained, anxious look, her lips were less tense, but she sighed audibly, and quickly ejaculated,

"Yes, poor boy! He has to be guarded! He has been very unfortunate to have *such* a mother!"

"Even so. Now the worst thing that could happen to him, in his present state, would be to let him know, if he does *not* know, of the taint that he carries in his blood. I know that his father meant to keep the truth from him, but children find out so many things, you know. You have known him from his childhood; tell me, do you think he knows or *guesses* that his mother was *insane?*"

"Know it!" she cried, clasping her hands dramatically. "How could he, when the—oh! so dreadful secret has been guarded—oh! *so carefully*—by his father, by myself, and others, so *few* did know it. And who would *tell?—No*, he never knew it, *never!*"

"Thank you." The doctor arose with alacrity. "Then there is no reason why our friend may not soon be himself again, and able to take his place in the family councils."

"Oh, true. He is now the master here, is he not? An only son—"

"Probably," dryly. "But it's rather premature to *call* him master until the will has been read."

"Ah, yes! The will, and—" she caught her breath, hesitated for just an instant, and then asked, "And that—will that be—be very soon—before the—the burial—perhaps?"

"Not *before*, certainly. That is all, Madam Sarita, and thank you." He made a movement as if to pass her, but she did not seem to see it.

"And the burial?" she questioned timidly, "will *that* be soon?"

"Nothing has been decided as yet." He opened the door, and, stepping back, motioned her to pass out before him, which she did, with a quaint half-curtsy, and a murmured "Thanks! and pardon, monsieur!"

. . . . . .

When Doctor Liscom revisited his patient, Bruce accompanied him and relieved the man who had been in attendance.

"He seems a little bit dazed yet, sir," said the servant, as he met them at the threshold, "but he ain't quite so restless. I think the powders is a workin'."

"I hope so," replied the doctor. "Mr. Deering will take your place now, William, but you had better sleep in the next room, I think; Mr. Deering *may* need you."

But such was not the case. For an hour or two Brook was quiet and seemed half asleep. As the evening wore on, he became restless, and kept up a constant motion of hands, or head, or feet; he spoke but little, and only in half-uttered exclamations; but often he would sigh heavily, and now and then a groan, or a half sob, would seem to burst from him against his will. Almost at midnight his nervousness increased, and the restlessness, which had seemed lessening, grew more marked and constant. For an hour or more this continued, until it burst all bounds, and he began to talk, rapidly, incoherently, a jumble of words, meaningless, and seemingly made up of fragments of remembrances past and present. At this point Bruce summoned William, and after some consultation they doubled the dose, as they had been instructed to do in an emergency, and, with some difficulty, prevailed upon Brook to swallow his medicine.

Another long hour of raving followed, and then gradually the patient grew calmer, talked less, then ceased to talk, threw himself about with slackening energy, and then became almost passive.

At this point, Bruce prevailed upon him to move from the couch to the bed, which was fresh and cool, and screened from the light, and here he sank slowly into what seemed a dream-haunted sleep, in which he lay quiet enough, but whispering as he dreamed.

Midnight had now passed into the small hours, and Bruce, constrained to a quiet which made it difficult to control the drowsiness that now assailed him, was not sorry to hear a light tap at his door, and not much surprised to find Sarita standing at the threshold.

"Is he sleeping?" she asked, as he held up a warning finger. Then in response to his nod she went on rapidly, but in the lightest and clearest of whispers: "I came at midnight to the door, but he was so *wild*, I ran away again, for I knew you *could* not leave him *then*,—not even for hunger! I have kept the best, and there is the coffee hot. It is in the little morning-room,—can you not come now? All seems quiet." Then as he hesitated, tempted, indeed, as what man would not be who had slighted his food all the day—"If you do not mind—I might *serve* you, sir, and then run quickly here and sit until you come. I could be very quiet," she hazarded.

Bruce looked back, the patient was sleeping, and remembering the double dose of anodyne he said:

"Very well, Sarita, that will do, only—you need not go down with me; go in and look after Brook; I will take care of myself. If you need anyone, William is in the next room."

But Brook was sleeping when Bruce came back half-an-hour later, and Sarita reported his slumber as quite unbroken, and *almost* quiet. "There have been some whispers, but only a few, *very* faint, and *quieter* at the last."

And quieter he was. At daybreak all whispering had ceased. His sleep appeared dreamless, and two hours later, when Bruce, once more relieved by Sarita, came back from his early breakfast, he found his cousin not only awake, but quite calm. He was very weak, however, and the doctor forbade much talk. He was willingly quiet now, and very patient, but he still clung to Bruce; it seemed the one remnant of his late unreason. He wanted Bruce all the time within his sight, and, seeing him, he was, in all other respects, as wax in their hands. All the morning he remained quietly upon his couch near the half-darkened east window, but at mid-day he asked permission to rise.

"Bruce," he said to his cousin, when, William having helped him to dress, he sat in his lounging-chair close beside the window, from which the couch had been rolled away, "I am thinking all the time of one thing, and it would be better, I am sure, that I speak and stop the repeated mental questions that I cannot keep back;"—he paused for a moment, and then went on, slowly, and in a low soft monotone, as if he were measuring his strength and husbanding it—"I know I have no strength for 'vain repetitions,' and I know also that there is a matter which should not be delayed—and in which—I should have a voice." He dropped his face upon his hand, and with it thus half

concealed from the other's view, went slowly on: "I want you to ask —the doctor—is Ware still here?"

"Doctor Ware will remain here, for the present, at Mrs. Deering's request," replied Bruce.

"So! Then he should be one of us. Then won't you ask the *two* medical men to come here after luncheon? I cannot—yet meet with —the—ladies, and talk in—in their presence. But I *must* express my wishes and—ideas; and then you may confer with them and arrange as best we can. You understand me?"

"I understand," Bruce replied; "but we must first consult the doctor."

"I know! But Liscom will agree with me—I *can't rest* like *this!*"

And Liscom did agree with him, after consulting Ware. "I see no better way," he said, "now that he has made up his mind; and by hearing him, in this manner, we may save an unpleasant scene; and something *must* be decided on soon; we must talk it over with Mrs. Deering."

Mrs. Deering decided for them promptly. "If you think he is able to go through with it, it surely ought to be done. For, with Brook or without him, *some* action must be taken without another day's delay. Hear Brook—if you can—by all means, and the sooner the better. I am glad to be left out, and so, I know, will Val be. And I am anxious to hear what comes of your interview; make it as short as possible." And they did.

Brook was lying back in his invalid's chair, when the two physicians entered his room and seated themselves near him. His back was now toward the window, which gave all the light permitted in the room, and this light fell upon the faces of his visitors, while his own countenance, looking pallidly out from the shadow, seemed almost weird by contrast, and his blue eyes, hollow and dusky-ringed, looked pathetically large in the dimness about them.

"Gentlemen," he began, when he had greeted them, and courteously expressed his thanks to Doctor Ware for the assistance he was rendering them all, "I know I cannot waste my words, and I feel *here*," he placed his hand above his heart, "*one* potent reason. Let me, I beg, get it over, *my* part in it, as soon as I can." He paused a moment, then—"You agree that my father died from—poison—do you not?"

They both bowed silently.

"Have you found out the poison used? and have you made any discoveries? Tell me what you can."

"The drug was arsenic, given in several doses. We have discovered absolutely nothing beyond this," answered Liscom.

"Then—we must find the—culprit, in—*this very house?*" He spoke in the same restrained monotone he had used in addressing Bruce, and this time there was no response from either of his listeners.

"How many people have we in all?" He seemed to be mentally recalling them by name; but Bruce broke in almost curtly,

"Four men servants, half-a-dozen women, including Mrs. Merton and Sarita. The ladies—you and myself, fourteen all told."

"And one of these—" he caught his breath, and did not finish the sentence. "Shall we let this—be known to all Pomfret? to all the

world, or shall we keep my father's name out of the mouths of the multitude, while we search for the—the destroyer? *Can* we keep the secret, and do our work as well, for the—the wretch *must* be found! *Nothing else matters after that!*"

It was the question of questions with each and all, and being assured of this, Brook said at once,

"If we can keep the secret and still do what we must, by all means let us keep it—as long as we *can!* Bruce, what say you?"

"There will be but one voice upon *that.*"

Brook's head dropped back upon his cushions, and his words came lower and slower:

"It is *my* wish that my father be buried, as is fitting, with no haste, and all respect; that nothing be omitted, or lacking; and that, during the days that intervene before he is laid to rest, this awful secret shall be kept out of sight. Let none of the servants be dismissed, and, as soon as the last respects have been paid, let skilled helpers be called upon *at once*, and the work of vengeance begin!"

Doctor Ware arose suddenly, and caught the white hand which gripped at the chair-arm in his own.

"This is enough," he said, with a quick glance toward the others. "Mr. Deering, your wishes coincide in every detail with those of your father's wife. *Your* first endeavour, *now*, must be to put yourself in your physician's hands, and do nothing that may tend to retard your quick recovery. You have a strong will—*use it;* and, for the rest, until you are able to take command here, leave *all* to your friends." Then turning, "Gentlemen, Mr. Deering must be released from the restraint he has put upon himself. What he must have *now* is his valet—and—rest."

"Thank—you," muttered the white lips feebly; and as the three men went out at one door, William, fully instructed as to his duties, entered at the other, and took his young master in charge.

CHAPTER XXX.

A STRANGE WILL.

FIVE long days passed at Beechwood, during which the occupants came and went drearily, and the splendid house seemed under some gloomy spell. Then the great cavern doors were thrown open, the big bell of St. Mark's tolled, "solemn and slow and long," and down the long street and across the town went the plumed hearse, bearing the master of Beechwood out from the gates of his earthly home, to leave him at another and a narrower gate, which opens, notwithstanding, upon a grander dwelling and a better country; for Lysander Deering went over to the land of the blest with the mark upon his forehead by which the King knows His own.

Never had Pomfret witnessed a statelier or more decorous funeral, and never went mourners forth carrying heavier, stranger burdens; not alone of grief, and loss, and heartaches that might be uttered in the

light of day, and healed anon by time's beneficent healthful balm, but burdens of doubt, dread, horrors not to be spoken, embittering present grief and menacing darkly the days to come.

"I tell ye," said Tom Wells to his maiden sister, who cared for his interests, and was seldom seen beyond her own doorstone—"I tell ye, Rushy, you don't very often see four chief mourners as well matched in age and looks as them four; an' a *sorrier* group you *never* see. Of course no two takes trouble jest alike! For instance, them two cousins. Mr. Brook Deering's been purty sick they say, and he *looks* it; walked strong enough first off, but seemed as if he couldn't hold up to see it through, jest kind a drooped all the way, and kept his face out o' sight behind his hands and handkercher, an' kind a shiverin' now an' then. Now, there's Bruce Deering, one'd think *he'd* had enough to pull *one* man down, takin' things altogether; but there he was, head up, walkin' straight and firm; and settin' jest as straight; warn't ashamed to let the tears come into his eyes, either; I *saw 'em* more than *once* drop on his cheek; an' he'd wipe 'em off, quiet like. An' then the ladies—Miss Rodney *she* cried sort o' soft an' quiet, behind her veil, and kind o' leaned toward Mrs. Deering now an' then, as if she wanted to sort of comfort *her;* but law! they say that deepest grief is stillest; and I'm sure no statute never was stiller than Mrs. Deering was, from first to last, 'cordin' to all accounts. Wal! There won't be another man like Mr. Deering to the head of things in Pomfret, not in one while. He was a good man from the ground up! An' it was an awful sudden taking off, though he had been ailin' for a long time, more or less. Heart Failure, that's what the doctors called it."

"Humph!" ejaculated matter-of-fact Sister "Rushy." "Jest as if *every*body didn't die of *heart failure!* Doctors ort to know better, anyhow! I reckon it's a good enough name though when they don't know any better one! But I guess if it wa'n't for our *hearts failin'*, first and last, the angel poperlation wouldn't go on increasin' at sich a rate,—'cordin' to the gravestuns." Rushy, after her manner, was a philosopher.

Lysander Deering was the last of four brothers, and his parents were long since dead. Brenda had few near relatives within call, and the carriages, following that occupied by herself, Valentine, and the son and nephew of the dead, carried first two elderly men, cousins of the Deerings in the first and second degree, and with them, a sweet-faced lady, the aunt of Brenda and Valentine, and her husband. These were the only relatives present. Brenda's step-mother had been for two years living in Europe, where a young step-sister was studying hard to become a singer of renown; and the step-brothers and young cousins were at school.

There was little room in Brenda's heart for thoughts of hospitality, though she did not fail in any of its duties, and she could only sigh with relief when she learned that her husband's cousins, busy men of the world, had planned their going, as well as their coming, and in the same rapid fashion. They "had left their business at a moment's notice," and must return promptly, "unless their services were needed," in which case *one* of them, of course, would willingly leave his own affairs in the hands of the other; "she had only to command," and so

on; and in all sincerity. But Brenda assured them that all her matters of business were in careful and accustomed hands, and in absolute order, and that her troubles were only such as she must bear alone. And so, little dreaming of the tragedy enveloping and overhanging the splendid home of their cousin's beautiful widow, the two good and busy men bade a kindly good-bye to all at Beechwood, and, two hours after their return from the grave of Lysander Deering, stepped into the Deering carriage, and hastened to catch a through train cityward.

As for the dear gentle aunt, Brenda had no misgivings. At the first mention of a business meeting that same evening, she had said, with a gentle smile,

"I know, dear; at least, I suppose you must get the legal forms over and done with, and I think you are wise to have them over at once; and I'm *so* glad you don't need *me*, dear! Our long journey, and this sad day at the end of it, has wearied us both. Your uncle had but just returned from a week in Washington, and is really suffering from want of sleep. Of course, dear, if you need me, if I can make it easier for you—"

But Brenda assured her to the contrary, and added, frankly,

"In fact, auntie, the lawyers have thought it best, on account of some personal matters, concerning others, which will doubtless come up, that there be none present except those closely concerned, and so—"

"And so my mind is easy. You know, dear, I *do* dread these things a little; and I *am* an outsider."

So it was settled, and the household, after the sad and silent luncheon, and the departure of the two Deering cousins, fell under a strange sombre silence.

Bruce and his cousin were, as they had been for so much of the time since the death of Mr. Deering, together in Brook's apartment. There had come an unlooked-for change for the better in the appearance of Brook Deering. He had rallied after that first night of rambling and restlessness, and had made an evident effort to overcome his weakness. He had been docile in the hands of Doctor Ware, in the necessary absence of Doctor Liscom, but through it all he had clung to Bruce, keeping him at his side almost constantly while confined to his room, and when, during the last two days he had walked about the house, and through the grounds, it had been always in his cousin's company.

During these long days of waiting, the two young women, whom, it would seem, might, and should, have been comfort and stay each to the other, were strangely aloof and isolated. During the years of their girlhood together, and always since, up to the present time, they had been the warmest, the truest, and tenderest of friends, but there were no confidences now, and little companionship; they met regularly at table, where were also Doctor Ware—generally Bruce, and often Doctor Liscom, but the murmured excuses with which they began to delude each other and cheat their own consciences, gradually fell into disuse, and they separated, upon leaving the table, silently and by mutual consent,—and could either if questioned, have told the other why?

Brenda Deering was standing at her dressing-table, listless and heavy of heart, while her maid arranged the dark, soft folds of her sombre gown with hasty fingers, for the dinner-hour had been set ahead of the usual time, because of the matter in hand for the early evening, and the sun was already low. Twice, the faithful and anxious maid had put some question about the labour of her hands, and twice it had been ignored or unheard, and when a light tap sounded upon the door, and she looked up quickly for the word of command, none came. She arose then, and moved around the table until she was face to face with her absorbed mistress.

"Madam, there is someone at the door."

Brenda started. "Open it," she said, turning away from the table.

"It is a note," said the maid in a moment, "and there is an answer desired."

Brenda opened the sheet with listless fingers, and read the words, written in the strong, upright hand of John Redding.

"*Less than twenty minutes ago, Mr. Ingram knocked at my door, brought back by the news of your husband's death. He is at your service, and I only wait your permission to tell him everything. We cannot, in my opinion, be too strong.*

"*Redding.*"

With sudden energy Brenda went to her desk and wrote with hasty pen:—

"*By all means! This news comes like a message from* HIM *Tell Mr. Ingram everything! It is what* HE *would have done. And bring him with you. Say to him that I ask him to help us, in the name and for the sake of his friend.*

"*B. D.*"

At half-past seven o'clock the library of Beechwood was aglow with light, which only served to heighten the sadness and gloom upon the faces of those who sat beneath its rays. Side by side sat Brenda and Valentine, drawn together by the mutual dread of something they feared, but could not guess at. Not far from them were the two physicians, and on the opposite side of the library table were the two cousins; and while the ladies had drawn together by mutual desire, these young men, who had been for days like shadows, each to each, sat now apart, and without exchange of glance or word.

They were waiting for the two lawyers, and when they were at last announced, Brook Deering and Brenda arose simultaneously, and each took a step toward the new-comers; then there was a pause, slight but perceptible, after which Mrs. Deering, with head erect and steady voice and hand, swept on and greeted her dead husband's old friend and adviser.

Their words were few and lowly spoken, and then, with a stately gesture, she pointed to the table upon which lay papers, pens, and ink.

"We are quite ready, gentlemen," she said, "but first, let me present Doctor Ware to Mr. Ingram; the others are known to you, I think."

She resumed her seat, and the new-comer greeted Doctor Ware and then turned to Brook, who, since his entrance, had stood with one hand resting upon the library table. The greetings were silent for the

most part, and then Mr. Ingram seated himself in a chair, placed for him by the young son of the house, at the head of the table. He was a little man, slightly stooping, and with a thin, clean-shaven face, and deep-set black eyes, which could be keen or kindly, just as the mouth could be cynical, quizzical, or stern at will.

At the moment when Mr. Ingram had seated himself at one end of the table, John Redding, after exchanging glances with his brother-lawyer, drew forward a second chair and, seating himself opposite, laid upon the table a packet of papers.

At the same moment Brook Deering, without observing Redding's movements, had drawn from his pocket one or two papers, glanced at something written upon the outer covering of one of them, and stepping forward, laid these upon the table before Mr. Ingram.

"I have been ill since my father's death," Brook said, in a low gentle tone, "too ill to think connectedly, or to remember small formalities, and it could hardly be expected that the ladies, in the absence of their legal adviser, would think of putting seals upon my father's effects. Finding that they remained as usual, and it seeming my duty, last evening, in company with my cousin, who acted simply as witness, I opened my father's desk and found, just as I expected to find, my father's will, drawn, I think, by yourself, Mr. Ingram, some five years ago or more."

He moved back a pace, glanced about him, and slowly resumed his seat; while upon the faces of all present, except the little man at the head of the table, there rested for a moment expressions of surprise.

Again the two lawyers exchanged significant glances. Then Mr. Ingram quietly took up the will just placed before him, and said, turning toward Brook:

"My young friend, your long absence, your illness, and the other things that have occurred in too swift succession since your return, will explain your lack of knowledge concerning recent events. To begin, I am no longer your father's executive. I gave up business of every sort almost a year ago, for reasons which we need not enter into here. And two months ago, or a little more, in the city of New York, and in presence of his wife, Brenda, and his ward, Miss Rodney, your father made and constituted John Redding, Esq., his attorney and man of business in general. At that time I placed in said John Redding's hands, together with other papers, the *last* will and testament of Lysander Deering, written by *me* and certified to *under my eye* nearly *one year ago;* consequently," here he arose and moved toward the lower end of the table, "the *will* which you are here to listen to is in Mr. Redding's possession; and as Mr. Redding is now the attorney for the estate of Lysander Deering, *he* will occupy *this* chair, and read at his pleasure the document he now holds in his hand."

As Redding moved to the other end of the table and seated himself in the lately vacated place, Brook Deering arose again. The surprise occasioned by the first words of the little lawyer had faded from his face, leaving it as quiet and gentle as at first.

"You will pardon me, Mr. Redding; anything done by my father must be *right* in the eyes of his son! I am acquainted with the con-

tents of *this* will." He gently took up the will he had laid down before Mr. Ingram. "The *other* will be new to me, and I shall hear it and accept it as the last word from my father." He turned again and resumed his seat.

In the silence that followed, John Redding stood up with the unopened will in his hand.

"Before breaking the seal of this package," he said with quiet self-possession, "I wish to say that all herein contained was penned by Mr. Ingram; so I was assured by the late Mr. Deering, who read over each of these papers and sealed them with his own hand, in the presence of Mr. Ingram, myself, and Mrs. Deering. Understand me, Mr. Deering did *not* read them *aloud*, and he assured me that the only persons acquainted with their contents at that time were himself and Mr. Ingram. For this reason I am *very* glad to have Mr. Ingram present to-night."

He placed the packet before him upon the table, and took from his pocket a tiny knife.

"I am about to break the seal," he said; "and first, Mr. Ingram, Mrs. Deering, look at it, if you please."

The lawyer took the big envelope, looked at it, and gravely handed it to Mrs. Deering, who returned it to Redding after a single glance.

"Is it intact?" he asked.

"It is," replied Mr. Ingram. Brenda bowed her head.

With a quick movement of his knife Redding removed the seal, and two or three separate papers fell from his hand upon the table. He took up the largest and held it out to view, so that all could see that this in its turn was stoutly sealed.

"*This*," he said gravely, "is the last will and testament of Lysander E. Deering." He leaned across the table, placed the document before Mr. Ingram, and took up another, smoothly folded and with no writing visible, but unsealed.

"The will," he went on, "I consign to Mr. Ingram's care, until I shall have read what is herein contained." He opened the second paper, spread it smooth upon the table before him, and taking it up began to read slowly and distinctly.

The paper began with the usual formal declaration of name, date, residence, and clearness of intellect, and then followed this unusual statement:—

"Having, upon the above date and in said condition, executed, by the hand of my friend and legal adviser, James H. Ingram, my will, and caused it to be sealed in presence of my wife, Brenda Flood Deering, my attorney and former legal adviser, the said J. H. Ingram, and John Lyon Redding, attorney, whom I have this day constituted my legal adviser in the place of J. H. Ingram, who to-day retires from my service, with the promise, or proviso, that in case of emergency, or need, he will, if physically able, come to the assistance of said John L. Redding, or advise with him in such ways as seems best, and is to both satisfactory. And the said John L. Redding and J. H. Ingram, having bound themselves by a promise to carry out, in case of my death, and within a reasonable and proper time thereafter, certain other wishes

and arrangements made by me this day, all of this to be done before the opening of my will, which shall remain *unopened* in the hands of John L. Redding, or his appointed agent, *until such time* as will be hereinafter specified. And these are my wishes and commands.

"1st. After my death, and when I shall have been laid in my last earthly bed, I desire that my dear and faithful wife, Brenda, shall continue to remain at Beechwood as its mistress, the same as before, acting as if *for me*, in my absence, having sole and *entire* charge of all my properties and estates, managing and handling their revenues according to her will and best judgment, advised and assisted by John Lyon Redding, who agrees to continue in her service as in mine, as legal adviser and agent, at her desire.

"2nd. To my beloved ward, Valentine Rodney, I say, that all her business, moneys, and interests of every kind, await her pleasure in the vaults of my New York bankers. When she shall leave this, my guardianship, which has ever been a pleasant duty, as her presence under my roof has ever been a pleasure, by this writing I leave her *free to choose for herself* a guardian, or legal adviser, and I *strongly recommend* my old friend and partner, Ransom Baird. I also hope that she will remain for the year to come, as before, at Beechwood, as the companion and friend of my wife, Brenda. And that these two will continue to be, as heretofore, close companions and comfortable friends.

"3rd. To Brook Deering—I request that, for one year, he shall continue as before drawing his yearly allowance of five thousand dollars, and as much as is possible, to live, whether at Beechwood or elsewhere, as if I were *still* the master of Beechwood, as, *in fact*, though in spirit rather than the flesh, I shall, for a year to come, continue to be. To Bruce Deering, my nephew, I can only repeat the above, let him as usual make Beechwood his home. And when in need of friend or adviser turn, for my sake, to my best of friends, Baird and Ingram.

"All of this I have said to you each, because it is my wish *and command* that my *complete will*, now under seal,—in which all of my worldly goods are allotted according to my desire and best judgment,—shall remain *with seal unbroken* in the care of John L. Redding, to be opened *here in my library*—where I desire *this* also to be read—one year and one day after the date of *this reading*, and should anyone attempt to annul, or break, or change these, my desires and commands, I charge my wife and my solicitor to resist such attempt *to the last day of the* probationary year. Amen."

CHAPTER XXXI.

OBJECTS OF SUSPICION.

IN the midst of the silence which followed the reading of this singular document, John Redding laid it upon the table before him, and looked about him. Lawyer Ingram sat like a Sphinx at the foot of the table,

his face quite inscrutable. Brook Deering and Brenda might have been made of marble or been deaf and dumb, so silent and expressionless they sat. But the faces of Bruce Deering and Miss Rodney were studies of surprise, as was also that of Doctor Liscom. As for Doctor Ware, his face was, as usual, perfectly calm, and quite unreadable, but John Redding noted that his eyes were fixed, not keenly, but yet closely, upon the countenance of Brook Deering.

Taking up the third paper the young solicitor began :

"I wish to say, here, that this paper which I have just read is as new to me as to anyone of you. It was written, as well as this sealed will, by Mr. Ingram before I came into the council. I merely *saw* these documents, both of them, in Mr. Deering's hands, and was assured in the presence of other witnesses that they had both been read by him, and that they exactly expressed his wishes. Am I right, Mr. Ingram?"

"Quite right."

"But *this* paper," he held up the last of the three documents contained in the sealed envelope, "was written by me at the desire of Mr. Deering, and assisted by Mr. Ingram. It contains a list and description of Mr. Deering's property, stocks, bonds, real estate, notes, and other valuable documents, with such information concerning them, and such advice as he thought would enable Mrs. Deering, for whose use this is written, or such agents or assistants as she may appoint, to understand everything and to simplify their work. This paper is witnessed only by Mr. Ingram and myself, and Mr. Deering's instructions regarding it I have written, for my own better remembrance, across the back of the document. They are as follows," and he read—

"These minutes are for the use of Mrs. Deering, or for reference of others who may have any reasonable desire to understand my business arrangements. They may, if it is the desire of any, be read together with the other paper enclosed with my sealed will." He turned to Brenda.

"Mrs. Deering," he said, "this paper contains a clause which concerns *you alone.* It is the *last* paragraph. The rest is purely statistical. Will you look at it?"

She took the paper from his hand and perused the few lines at the bottom, then she arose and handed it back.

"The clause," she said, with a look and in a tone which, to most of them, seemed strangely stern and cold, "makes a request, which I am about to fulfil. If you will read it, now, Mr. Redding, all here can bear me witness of the fact."

He opened the paper and she remained standing, and with head erect, until he had read the paragraph.

"To conclude," it ran, "before this document sees the light, I shall have passed over to the majority; and my wife, Brenda Flood Deering, will hold in her possession a certain paper put into her hand by me, and to be opened and used in a manner and at a time known to herself. And I here suggest and request, that she, upon reading this, at once put this paper into the hands of either Mr. Ingram or John Redding *for safe keeping.* My reasons for this *she will not fail to comprehend.*"

As he ceased the reading, and while the others were, for the first time, exchanging glances of surprise and inquiry, in which Brook now joined, Brenda passed the lawyer with a grave nod, and went out of the room.

She was absent so long that those who waited, at first in silence, began to look about them restlessly, and at last to exchange low-voiced comments upon her prolonged absence, in the midst of which she returned, empty-handed, and with the strange, stern look intensified upon her face. She came straight to the table, and, standing midway between the two lawyers, laid one palm upon it, and seemed to lean heavily thus.

"Gentlemen," she said, looking from one to the other, "it is not *six weeks* since the paper referred to, *sealed like this will*, was put into my hands by Mr. Deering. By his direction I put it away in the safest place at my disposal in a little secret drawer in my writing-desk, which is never approached, or so I thought, by anyone save myself. To-day I find the lock of the secret drawer broken, and the paper gone."

And now the silence was broken indeed, and quietly but earnestly the possibilities of the case were discussed, the two lawyers and the two doctors entering into the inquiry with anxious interest, while both Brook and Bruce Deering stood a little in the rear of those gathered closest about the table, saying very little.

"Mrs. Deering," spoke Doctor Ware after a time, "you say that the seal of the package, or paper, was intact; do you know by whom it was written? Is it possible that—"

But she interrupted him by a quick shake of her head.

"I am *sure*," she said, "that the contents were only known to my husband. The paper was written, he told me, *by himself* to *insure absolute secrecy*."

"And yet—" Doctor Ware began, and stopped to allow Mr. Ingram, who had risen, to speak before him.

"I only wish," broke in Mr. Ingram, "to say this. I am aware that Mr. Deering wrote a document intended for Mrs. Deering's eyes, and for hers only. The nature of its contents was never so much as hinted at to me."

And then began a series of rapidly-uttered questions and suggestions concerning the Beechwood servants. Were they all well-known? Were there any new ones?—any who had been, at any time, or in any way, offended? Who had access to Mrs. Deering's rooms? and would it not be well to question some of them—beginning, perhaps, with Mrs. Deering's maid?

But here Brook Deering, who had taken no part in the discussion occasioned by the discovery of this loss, pushed himself into the little circle that had gathered close about the table, and his first word silenced them all, uttered, as it was, in a sudden sharp tone of authority.

"This cannot be done! It *must* not! I regret Mrs. Deering's loss, and hope and believe it may be recovered, but paramount to my father's papers, *any of them*, comes his unhappy fate! No servant of Beechwood must be questioned, or in any manner alarmed *in the slightest degree*, until all have been properly examined with reference to

my father's death. And—it seems to me that we would do well at once to resolve ourselves into a committee to discuss, and, if possible, decide how we can best and quickest begin the work of ferreting out the poisoners. Compared with this nothing else is of importance—at least to *me!*" There was a sudden break in his voice, and he swayed slightly, as if dizzy or faint.

"Pardon," he said to Doctor Ware, who had put out a sustaining hand, "I am not so strong as I thought, but, I *cannot* leave this room until something is decided upon." He glanced at the ladies who now stood side by side. "My cousin, I am sure, is anxious for this, and you, I suppose," bowing to John Redding, "are empowered to act for Mrs. Deering. If the ladies will withdraw, or permit us to retire—"

"One word," broke in Brenda Deering; her voice was as cold and commanding as his own, and she fixed her eyes upon his face for a full moment; "I quite agree that time enough has passed in inactivity, and that action should be taken *at once*, but Lysander Deering's wife can have no deputy, and hold no second place in a consultation such as has been proposed; and Miss Rodney, I know, will stand at my side."—For answer, Valentine silently placed a hand upon her shoulder. "As to the loss and the finding of the sealed paper, *I* for one am confident that when the poisoner is found, we shall also have found the *thief*. Gentlemen, please resume your seats, there are really only two questions to settle at present. And, first, shall we continue to keep the truth a secret among ourselves? Will it help us to make it known? Will it hinder us to keep it? Mr. Ingram—gentlemen all, help us with your advice! Bruce—Brook, what are *your* wishes?"

Brook had sunk wearily back in his chair, his head dropped upon his hand, and now he said, as if with an effort: "I want my father's death avenged, *first* and *most*. The *way* matters little."

Most of the others have resumed their seats, but Brenda remains standing, and as he ceases, she turns toward his cousin.

"Bruce?"

"If *possible* I would like to keep my uncle's name sacred and apart from this horror. *But the murderer must be found!*" His words are quietly, firmly uttered, and she turns, seats herself beside Valentine, and nods across to Mr. Ingram.

"I could wish Mr. Baird were with us," he says slowly, and looks, as he speaks, from face to face, with his keen, shrewd eyes, very intent. Then he is silent a moment, and his eyes rest upon the face of Doctor Ware. "Sometimes," he resumed in the same quiet manner, "the person most upon the outside, and, therefore, able to see all phases of the subject, can give the clearest opinion. Doctor Ware, that you have an opinion, I can see; will you share it with us?"

The quick and comprehensive glance which the young doctor turns upon him establishes, at once, that *rapport* which is so readily confirmed between two congenial spirits, but Doctor Ware's words are addressed toward Brenda Deering.

"I was thinking," he says, "that perhaps the question of publicity should rest where it is, to be decided by the detective, who should be consulted as soon as possible, and who might well consider that very point of first importance."

Mr. Ingram put out his hand across the table: "Doctor," he said, "you have put me to shame, and now—"

There was a sharp knock at the door, and Brenda arose with an expectant look. Bruce, who was nearest the door, arose also.

"Shall I open it?" he asked.

She nodded, and the door being opened, Mrs. Merton in person announced, with her eyes fixed upon Brenda,—

"Mr. Baird is here, Mrs. Deering."

"Send him in at once," said Mrs. Deering; and then, to those within the room, "I sent for Mr. Baird. I knew we must consult him."

"One moment!" Mrs. Merton, who had turned to go, paused and looked back, as Doctor Ware made a quick stride toward the door.

"Please send some wine to Mr. Brook Deering," he said to her in a low tone; "he is ill."

Brook is lying back in his chair, and his lips are livid. When Mr. Baird enters, he takes in the situation at a glance, and goes at once to his side.

"Brook, you look too ill to be here," he says kindly, "won't you go to your room, and trust everything to us?"

Brook looks up at him, and feebly shakes his head. The wine comes, and he seems revived by it, but Doctor Ware keeps an eye upon him, and remains standing near. Mr. Baird crosses over and stands before Brenda, bending to take her trembling hand.

"Mrs. Deering," he says with fatherly kindness, "can I serve you in any way?"

"Yes," she says, looking straight up into his grave and sympathetic eyes, "help us to find a detective clever enough, wise enough, to discover the poisoner of your friend—and my husband."

"Is that it?" He turns toward the group at the table.

"That is it, Mr. Baird," says John Redding, "and I believe you can help us."

"I believe I know the man for you! the very man! And when I say 'know him,' I mean that we have literally dwelt under one roof for weeks. I anticipated this, and, without meaning to thrust a choice upon you, but because I felt that, for my own sake, in my own interest, I must see and consult with him, I telegraphed two days ago for *Ferriss Murtagh*."

"*Ah!*" burst from the lips of Bruce Deering, and his eye lighted up, but he checked the exclamation, and stood erect beside his cousin's chair, while Mr. Baird, seating himself beside Brenda, went on:

"This name may be unfamiliar to most of you, but I may as well say at once that Ferriss Murtagh is the man who was here in disguise until recently. I believe we can find no better man."

He did not need to speak the name of Joe Matchin there, all understood the allusion, and to Brenda, and Bruce, and Doctor Liscom, the name was not unknown.

Seeing the inquiry in Mr. Ingram's face, Mr. Baird went over to the table and drew up a chair, and for a few moments the men discussed the merits of Ferriss Murtagh, all save Brook and Bruce Deering, who remained a few paces in the background, Brook lying back in his chair

with a weary look, except for the eyes, which were bright to feverishness, and which noted everything with intense eagerness.

As the talk about the table went on, he turned his head on the velvet cushions, and looked up to Bruce, who stood, with a hand upon the back of his chair, listening, with a face gravely inscrutable.

"Bruce," he said, in a low voice. The other bent down to him.

"You know who this man is?"

Bruce nodded.

"Tell me!" impatiently.

"He is the man employed upon the Matchin case, and discharged by—" He stopped.

"By my father?"

"Yes."

"Is he able?"

"I believe him to be."

"And yet—" He glanced at the group about the table, and then across to where Brenda and Valentine sat listening, with their eyes upon the others. "Do you think truly, Bruce, it means so much—do you think he would have succeeded—if he had been retained?"

"I don't know," absently.

"Do you think—listen, Bruce, do you *believe* he made any—*any discoveries?*"

Bruce was silent for a long moment, then,—

"I think he knew more than he chose to tell," he said, and drew himself erect, as if to close the aside.

A moment later Brook's slow, tired voice, slightly raised, broke into the talk about the table.

"Gentlemen, may I say a word?" As they turned toward him he lifted himself: "Will you give me your arm, Bruce?"

Leaning upon his cousin's arm he approached the group, waving away the chair which was quickly proffered.

"Thank you, no. Doctor, I fear I *must* retire, but I wish to say that, if you are *convinced* that this detective, recommended by Mr. Baird, is the best, the *very best*, to be found, I beg you to secure his services, to do it quickly, and let no expense or trouble be spared; personal feelings, everything, must be set aside." His eyes, for an instant, turned toward his father's wife as he uttered the last words. "I *want* to be one of your counsels, and I mean to overcome this weakness—but—" turning away, and drawing his cousin toward the door, "to-day has been—too much! Bruce—you will come with me?" The pressure upon his cousin's arm emphasised the request, and Bruce, nodding to the others, turned and led him out of the room. As they moved away, Doctor Ware stepped past them and opened the door.

"You had better take your cordial at once," he said, as they passed out, "and I will come up as soon as we separate."

"Ah!" exclaimed Brook, "and—you will tell us—both what you decide upon—in full?"

"Yes, if you are able to hear any more talk."

As they turned and went toward the stairway, Doctor Ware's gaze followed the fine form of Bruce Deering, as, with lips firmly closed,

and grave, unreadable face, he supported his frailer companion. "I *can't* understand it," he murmured to himself, as he closed the door and went back to the others.

They were all standing when he re-entered the room, and Mrs. Deering, with what seemed to him like a relieved look upon her face, was speaking,

"I do not understand it, Mr. Baird; you speak of this man as having been here, and as having sent for him upon your *own* account, because *you* wish to see him! Am I to understand that this detective is *no longer* engaged,—no longer investigating the Matchin murder?"

Mr. Baird glanced sharply about him. "There are no outsiders here," he said, after a moment's thought, and then he told them how the detective had been withdrawn from the Matchin case, by the desire of Mr. Deering. "He gave no reasons," he said, "save that he could not bear the anxiety of such an investigation, and when he asked me to waive all discussion and let the matter drop, I consented. I could do no less,—for *him*. And *now*—I am glad that I did not refuse."

"And—Bruce?" hesitated Brenda, while Valentine stood very erect and still.

"Bruce knew, and, like myself, consented."

John Redding and Doctor Liscom, who were in the secret, exchanged significant glances. Mr. Baird turned to Mr. Ingram:

"At another time I will make all this somewhat clearer to you, Mr. Ingram, and to Doctor Ware."

"I think," said the young doctor, "that I understand, at least, in part. Mr. Deering asked my advice, as to his taking active part or interest in any form of exciting or hazardous business. And I told him frankly that it would be putting health, perhaps life, in jeopardy, to attempt or continue in such business."

Again there was exchange of glances. Those who knew Lysander Deering best were fully aware that no personal risk or danger would have caused him to withdraw his hand.

"Brenda," spoke Valentine for the first time, "are *we* needed longer here? Is there anything more to be decided *now?*"

"No. I think not. At least," said Brenda, "I have only to repeat that I have heard my husband speak so highly of Detective Murtagh, though he never spoke his *name*—that I am willing to trust him. Only I, too, say, *waste no time*, and spare no expense! My life will be *one long horror* until this mystery is solved!" Her voice broke, and she averted her face. Then, with evident effort for self-mastery, "Gentlemen, will you remain here and complete your plans, and will you excuse us?" As they crossed the room, Mr. Ingram hastened to the door, which he opened wide, and, as they passed through, he managed by turning his back to the group within and drawing the door half shut behind him, to put into Brenda's hand a slip of paper, upon which he had scrawled a few words, and with which he had been trifling for some time.

Silently the two went up the stairs, and into Brenda's *boudoir*, together, and once there Valentine dropped with a long sigh upon a low couch, while Brenda made haste to unfold the bit of paper.

"Dear Madam," she read, "do not be uneasy about the lost *or* stolen paper, remember there are sometimes *duplicates*."

As this little ray of cheer in so much darkness fluttered from her fingers into Val's lap, that young woman, who had been so strong, sensible, and helpful from the first, flung herself face downward upon the couch and began to sob wildly, like one suddenly set face to face with some bitter grief or loss. It was so strange, so unlike her, that Brenda was startled.

She waited for the paroxysm to pass, and the sobs to become less violent, and then, her heart heavy with its own weight of woe, she knelt down beside her friend.

"Val, dear, what is it?—tell me!"

Then suddenly Val lifted herself and thrust away the clinging hands.

"Brenda Deering, tell me what it means; are we *all* going mad together? *Why* have they sent away that detective, and stopped the search for Joe Matchin's murderer, with guardy's consent and *his?* What terrible thing has stolen in among us? Why, *why*, WHY, must justice be baulked? *It shall not be!*"

. . . . . .

When Mrs. Deering and Valentine had gone, and the door was carefully closed, Mr. Ingram went briskly back to the others.

"Now, Mr. Redding," he began, "you as the family man of business must take your place. Mrs. Deering has bidden us do our best; we are here all of us, in her interest, and as friends of Lysander Deering."

"Mr. Baird," said Redding, "we can do nothing until we have had this matter before the detective. When shall you hear from him—or, will he come at once?"

"He is *here*," said Mr. Baird. "He came this morning."

When the momentary surprise had expended itself in comments and exclamations, Redding asked:

"Does he know—this?"

"He knows that Lysander Deering has been poisoned, nothing more. I was not authorised to negotiate—except for myself."

"For yourself?"

"Yes, I confess that I had determined, if you did not agree to have him here, to employ him upon my own behalf."

"And when can we see him?"

"As soon as you like, but *not here*. Murtagh is not thin-skinned, and so, when I was about to set out this evening, I told him the object of my going, and said to him, 'Mr. Murtagh, I am going to use my influence to get you into this business, and if I do, how shall you wish to begin?' 'With whom would I have to deal if I decided to accept?' he asked me. I told him, naming, with myself, Doctors Liscom and Ware, for Mrs. Deering had told me that she believed Ware could help us much, and had obtained his promise of assistance; Redding, of course; I was not then aware that Mr. Ingram would be one of us, and I ended by naming the ladies and the two young Deerings."

"And what was his answer?" asked Redding, eagerly.

"He assured me that, even if the case were offered him, he would

not accept it, until he knew it in all its bearings, and was given *carte blanche*."

"Well, and that granted?"

"That granted, he must see *us* first, by which I mean those here present, *without* the members of the *family—any* of them, and this first meeting must be *without their knowledge* and *at my house*."

"And did he give a *reason* for this request?"

"When *I* asked him for a reason, he looked me in the eye and said, 'You have told me that Mr. Deering was poisoned, and that there *had been no strangers under that roof during his entire illness*. Don't you *see*, therefore, that *every soul* under that roof must become *an object of suspicion*."

CHAPTER XXXII.

BROOK'S CONFIDENCE.

THE next morning, while Brenda and Valentine were pacing the eastern terrace, which was at the rear of the house, invisible from the highway and sheltered and secluded at all times, Brenda received a brief note from Mr. Baird.

"Mr. Murtagh has promised to serve you, and this I assure you means *much*. Will you so manage matters that I can see you *alone* at eleven o'clock this morning? I will call at that hour. BAIRD."

So ran the note, and no answer was required. Brenda stopped short in her walk to peruse it, and, a few paces away, Valentine halted, awaiting her. They had been together almost constantly since the night before, but they had been quite silent since Val's stormy outbreak upon leaving the library. Indeed, since the discovery of the poison, a strange feeling of constraint seemed to have fallen upon each. But now as Brenda lifted her eyes from the note in her hand, they met those of Valentine fixed upon her with wistful intentness, and she made a sudden step toward her, and put the paper in her hand.

"Read," she said.

Val read the few words at a glance, and gave the note back.

"I am glad!" she said quickly, and then, for a moment, both were silent, Brenda looking away and Valentine again studying her face. Suddenly she came closer and caught Brenda's hand in both of her own.

"Brenda!" she said very gently; "are you going to try to bear this all alone? Have you shut me out?" Brenda turned and their eyes met again. "Because," went on the young girl, "I *want* to help you, and—" her voice breaking, "I want you to help—*me!*"

Brenda caught her breath hard and slipped her free hand through her companion's arm, and so for a moment they moved slowly along the terrace.

"Val," began Brenda, "do you know that *I* am under suspicion?"

"You are *not!*"

"Yes."

"I say *you are not!* Oh, I know what you *mean!* I saw, and I understood! But what does the half wild talk or hint of a sick boy weigh? If he were not distraught—beside himself, I should hate Cousin Brook for that—but—"

"Val, mark me. There is more trouble to come. I feel it, and—Val, listen. You heard my husband's strange instructions: by them you are made your own mistress, you are free to go—to leave Beechwood and all this black trouble. *I* have no right to keep you here! And you are too young to be mixed in all this horror. Think, Val, a whole household under suspicion, a detective, more than one perhaps, watching our every breath. That is what it will be! Don't you see?"

"I see that you don't want me! And I never *dreamed*—Brenda Deering, tell me, *why* do you want to drive me away?"

"*Drive* you! Val, I am thinking of *you!* I dare not think of myself." She turned away her face.

Valentine stopped short, and, putting up her two little hands, forcibly turned the white pained face toward herself, then she dropped her hands, and, catching Brenda's arm, drew it close within her own.

"Dear," she said with tearful firmness, "we *must* understand each other. And to begin, let me tell you that I would *never forgive you* for sending me away, if I thought you did not *want* me! And that I would not go even if you said go! This is not the time for *any* one to leave Beechwood. And I hope you want me, and need me—a little. I *want* to help you—as much as I can—but even if I can't help or comfort you, dear, I *must and will stay.*"

"Oh, Val, Val!" Brenda caught her in her arms, and held her close. "You *know* how I need you. And since you *will* stay, I am glad! I can't think how I could have borne to live here *now* without you!" And for some moments the two walked on, silent, but feeling that, somehow, the barrier between them, which each felt, and neither could define, had been borne down by their mutual love, and trust, and sorrow. It was Valentine who broke the silence as they turned to go toward the house.

"Brenda—about Brook, do—do you think there is—danger—for his reason?—his mind? He seems so strange, so different."

"His *mind!* How—do you know—" Brenda stopped short. She had supposed that no one, save herself and Bruce, knew the truth concerning Brook's mother.

"Yes. I know, and—we are going to confide in each other, are we not, Brenda?—I'll tell you how. Not long before Brook went away, you know he was—was—"

"Was very much in love with you," interposed Brenda, gently. "Yes, we could all see that—and not Brook only—"

"Hush! Well, Uncle Lys called me into the study one day, and talked to me very gently and kindly, as he always did. He—he wanted me to know the truth about Brook—and what might come upon him, perhaps, at some future time—to warn me, if need be."

"Yes."

"And so I know. And I can't help seeing how much Brook is affected by all this trouble. Oh, Brenda, he must have been a little wild, or he never—"

"Hush, dear, and don't be uneasy about Brook; I have talked with Doctors Ware and Liscom, and they agree that this disturbance is only what might have been looked for from one of his temperament. They think he will soon be himself again."

"How fortunate that Doctor Ware is here! And how relieved I feel concerning Brook. Poor boy! Brenda, what would you do if the worst should happen to him?"

Brenda Deering looked down upon that lovely face upturned to hers with grave intentness. "Do not be anxious, dear; if that should happen, and we do not look for it, be sure that my dear husband's only son should never be sent among strangers. I would keep him at Beechwood with nurses, if that would serve; or, if need be, with *keepers*,—and a straight-jacket."

"Oh!" shuddered Valentine, "but that would be terrible!"

"Yes," replied Brenda Deering with bitter emphasis; "if that happens, it will indeed be the crowning horror, and I shall *know* that something has brought a curse upon Beechwood."

There was a little more talk about Valentine, her business and her plans. Brenda was generous, but Valentine, who was generous also, had the final word, and uttered it with force and spirit.

"It's of no use, dear; I could not go anywhere, now, and be happy; as for being *gay* or seeking my own pleasure, you must know I can't do that! I'm better than nobody, and, so long as you need me, or until the shadows are lifted, I shall *stay* at Beechwood! It is still my home, by *his wish*—for a *year!*"

After this there were few reserves between them; only upon one topic the silence was almost absolute. Bruce Deering's name was not spoken between them, save in passing mention, and his affairs and interests were, as much as possible, ignored, seemingly, by mutual consent.

Bruce Deering did not appear at the breakfast table, but, while the others yet lingered in the morning-room,—silent, except for the desultory talk carried on with more effort than was manifest upon the surface between Doctor Ware and the aunt and uncle, who were the sole remaining guests, and who were about to leave Beechwood on the following day—Sarita opened the door, and Bruce entered. He had breakfasted with Brook, whom he reported as not quite strong enough to come down, but feeling calm, and anxious to see Doctor Ware, who, he hoped, would pronounce him able to lay aside his invalid habits, and begin to do his part as son of the house. "These," said Bruce, "were his own words, which I repeat, that you, doctor, may know what is expected of you." And then, as the doctor went his way, he turned to Brenda:

"I am going to town," he said, "in an hour. May I have a word with you before I go?"

She arose quickly. "At once," she replied, "for I expect Mr. Baird soon, and also Mr. Redding in the course of the morning;" and she led him across the hall and into the darkened library, where she drew aside one of the heavy curtains, and, seating herself near the window, bade him take the place nearest her.

"I am glad of this opportunity," she said at once, "but I will hear *you* before I begin."

"I think you know what it is that I wish to say. I want you to express your wishes—your *will*—concerning myself. Circumstances have so changed things that I can no longer consider my own feelings; indeed, I may say, these are changed in some ways since—since my uncle's death."

"I know," she sighed.

"I had said that I would not—*could* not—come back to Beechwood, as to my home, until the cloud hanging over me was lifted—in some manner. Now—I have talked with the others, Baird, Redding, Ingram, the rest. I have listened to my uncle's written request, and have been urged by Brook to come back, to remain here. I have set aside my own wishes, even my interests, as much as I can, and I now ask you what is *your* will? Will it suit you to have me come back? will it help or hinder?—can I be of use, or shall I be one shadow the more, when shadows are already too many? Be quite frank, Mrs. Deering, as frank as you were once before. What is your will?"

She had listened intently, and she now asked quietly,—

"Am *I* to decide this?"

"Yes."

"Then I say, *stay!* It was your uncle's wish living, he asks it dead; and for myself—Bruce, I will be frank. It will help me much to know that you are here—and that in my own house I have *one* friend—one who neither distrusts nor accuses—" He started, and she stopped suddenly. "Bruce—*do* you—distrust—accuse?"

"*I!* Great heavens, NO! How can you ask?"

"Because—you know—I may as well say it out: Brook has thrown down the gauntlet."

"Brook is maddened with grief!"

"I know! But the doubt was there before the madness. If he recovers, if he can take up the work actively, *he will be my enemy!*"

Bruce was silent.

"You know it," she added after a moment, and then she went on hurriedly, "Bruce, I can be quite frank with you. I must be! I must talk to someone. The *worst* has not yet come—for me! I have *two* enemies."

"Two!"

"Yes. That man Wiggins. Did you think we were rid of him? Even while my husband lay unburied in the house, that man has tried to approach me, has asked for an interview. It was a note this time, oh! vilely written and spelt. He says he can tell me *something to my advantage*, and that I refuse to hear it at my own risk."

"The brute! You must not let *this* pass. But he can have no reference to—"

"To this *last* horror? No, it has something to do with the amethyst button, I daresay."

Bruce groaned and struck his hands together in impotent anger.

"But, worst of all," she went on, "is the arrangement of the property. I can see how it must look to Brook; he no doubt accuses me of unduly influencing my husband; of unfairly getting all into my own hands, of undermining him in his absence; you can see how he might construe it so?"

"Not if he keeps his senses."

She turned away with a despairing gesture.

"How will it end?" she cried. "It is enough to drive us *all* mad! Bruce, your uncle trusted you *always*. Do you know *why* he made that strange will?"

"I! Heavens! Brenda! No. I do not even guess,—but you—surely *you* understand it?"

She started back, and her face flushed and paled again.

"I do not!" she answered, her tone grown suddenly cold. She took out her watch. "It is time for Mr. Baird—almost," she said. "You will come back then prepared to take up your old quarters? And, Bruce,—try to understand Brook, and—don't let—anything come between you two."

Their eyes met for a moment, then he moved toward the door. "I shall take possession of my old room at once," he said, "and in truth, I suppose I shall come under surveillance with the other inmates of Beechwood. One question: Is—is Miss Rodney to remain?"

"Valentine is to remain. She has the—courage and—the will."

"The wish also?"

"Also the wish."

"I am glad—for your sake." He put his hand upon the door.

"One thing," she said, coming a step after him. "I suppose we shall soon have a detective among us. I don't know how or when—yet, but it will be best that we do not seem to consult together, that we live as openly as possible; and—I shall let myself be guided by him altogether—I shall be quite frank concerning myself; for you—"

"I have nothing to conceal," he declared with a haughty lift of the head.

. . . . . .

Mr. Baird came promptly and his stay was not long.

Murtagh, he told her, held his decision in reserve until he could consult with herself. He must see her, alone, and without the knowledge of anyone at Beechwood. Could she leave the house quietly and be at the lower gate at eight o'clock? His carriage would be near and himself in waiting.

But Brenda would make no unnecessary mysteries: "I might succeed in going and coming unaided," she said firmly, "but the chances would be against it. It is not unusual for me to walk in the grounds at evening, usually upon the terrace. I can trust Mrs. Merton; she knows nothing about our need for a detective, and so can suspect nothing. I will tell her that I want to consult with you and with Mr. Redding, upon business matters of my own, and to do it privately. And she will see me to the gate, and have the door opening upon the terrace ready for me when I return. Will that serve?"

"It would serve admirably," he assured her, and went his way.

. . . . . .

When Doctor Ware entered Brook Deering's presence he found him sitting at his open window, clothed and groomed with nicest care; apparently quite calm, and seeming stronger than he had dared to hope or expect.

They talked for a few moments as men will when they are strangers,

almost, and surrounded by the gloom of a house of mourning. Then Brook began.

"Doctor, I am so, more than anxious to be well, to possess my usual strength, and the quietest of nerves, that I am, perhaps, growing womanish in my fancies. The fact is, I want to tell you about some queer symptoms which attended my sickness in New York, as well as that little attack upon the water," he paused and seemed to be considering his words; "I have never thought myself a nervous fellow, and yet I don't know how to account for *one* symptom of each of these attacks, unless I do attribute them to nerves—or—worse."

"Worse!"

"Doctor!" He drew his chair closer to that of his visitor, and lowered his tone, "I have reflected, and have determined to put my confidence in you rather than in Liscom. You are nearer the age when the sympathies would be most likely to interest themselves in my case, or any case, such as mine, and in truth, I find that I can more readily confide my mental anxieties to you, a stranger, than to Liscom, who knows me, as well as all others of whom I must speak. Shall I tell you of the 'symptoms' first, or of the causes to which I attribute the symptoms? Have you time to hear me a little longer?"

"My time is quite at your disposal, Mr. Deering, but I will hear the symptoms first if you please, and then shall appreciate your confidence if you choose to bestow it upon me."

"Then I will say, briefly, that a short time before I left Paris to come home, I found myself ailing, and, being eager to set out on the appointed day, I rather unwillingly consulted a physician. He told me it sometimes happened that travellers abroad overdrew upon their strength, in sight-seeing, doing the continent, etc., and that I had, no doubt, brought myself into this class. He said that, while there was no organic illness, I was menaced by a light attack of 'nerves,' which, if not relieved and the strain relaxed, might even become nervous prostration. I was ill a week. At the end of that time I set out eagerly for New York. On board ship I was again brought down, and the ship's doctor agreed with the other that nervous prostration was 'indicated.' He seemed interested in my symptoms, and I saw that he was studying me closely. Finally he questioned me about my family, the health and temperament of my parents, and he asked if any of my *ancestors* had been *the victims* of *nervous disease* in any form. When I told him that I thought *not* he seemed surprised, and at parting he gave me some good advice, warning me among the rest to avoid all strong excitement when possible, assuring me that the quieter my life the better my health was sure to be. Well, this grew monotonous. I had another little breakdown in New York, and for the third time was a victim of 'nerves,' and received the same good advice, more briefly given, to be sure, after the manner of the busy city physician, and with less display of personal interest. Now, doctor, upon each of these three occasions I have been singularly nervous, unable, in fact, to control either tongue or temper; excitable, and this, in me, is most unnatural; at the worst, experiencing sensations so *singular* that I have feared for myself. Doctor,—there were moments,

not long, and not frequent in their occurrence, when I *felt my brain reeling*, and I feared *for my sanity*."

He ceased speaking, and waited with his eyes fixed upon the other's face.

"There are two reasons," began Ware, slowly, "for attacks such as yours: one is a disordered physique; the other, mental strain, which may arise from over-study, too great stress of thought in the student, or trouble, grief, anxiety,—suspense."

"*Suspense!*" The word broke from Brook Deering's lips with sudden force, and his face dropped for a moment upon his hand. "As if *that* alone were not *enough!*"

In the long silence following these strange words, Doctor Ware leaned forward and took the wrist of the other between his own calm strong fingers. Deering lifted his head; and, after a moment, the hand was gently released, and the doctor said:

"If you wish to go on, if there is anything you wish me more thoroughly to understand, please let us have it over at once, and as briefly as you may—for your own sake. You are holding yourself in with a strong hand now; you must relax the strain—soon."

"Ah!" exclaimed his patient, "you *do* understand me! And, doctor, that is what I want! To be frank then, doctor, I am ill! I have *been* ill from *suspense* for *two years*, and it is beginning to tell! It's the old story, and I don't shine in it. I had but just returned from school when I met and, of course, became infatuated with a young lady, who was by years exactly my own age, and in experience was older than I by five. She was the daughter of a neighbour, one of my father's friends, handsome, brilliant, and accomplished, a woman to win and hold a wiser and a better man than I. Of course I became her slave, and she at first, I think, looked upon me as a mere boy. In act and deed for nearly two years I was her lover, though no words had passed between us, thanks to my father's wise counsel. He had made me see that I was too young to be altogether bound. While he did not object to the young lady, he *could* not; it was my youth which made him object. Well, I went away for a summer's outing, and when I came home all became changed; I met my father's ward, Valentine Rodney; she was not a stranger to me, but I had seen her last as a child; she came back to us, her school days done, a charming young woman. Then began a struggle; in honour I was bound to one with all my heart, and soul, and mind; I loved the other, but I was strong in those days, and no one, I am sure, guessed my secret; I was hopeful too, and decided between my desire to confess my fickleness to the first love, and trust to her womanly kindness and magnanimity, and the temptation to drift for a little and trust to time. And then, as fate would have it, my fair neighbour and her father went to Europe; even yet I did not speak; I was satisfied with things as they were, and in my young egotism confident of ultimate success."

He uttered the last words with a touch of bitterness. The doctor smiled and asked kindly—

"Are you tired?"

"No. I want to cut it. There came a day when fear fell upon me. I had not dreamed of a rival, when suddenly I discovered that another

man was biding his time like myself, and hoping to win her. It came about in this way: I was chatting with my father one evening over our after-dinner cigars, when the talk turned upon his ward, and he let drop a few words that struck me, little though he guessed it, like a blow. 'Valentine,' he said, 'is a lovely girl, and I was beginning for the first time to feel the weight of the responsibility which comes when a young girl reaches the marriageable age, and is beautiful and rich. If you had not been so prompt in choosing for yourself, I might have been tempted to turn matchmaker, but it is all right, or will be, I think. Bruce, quiet, self-contained Bruce, has spoken to me, and I have given my consent gladly; stipulating only that he wait until she has passed her nineteenth birthday, before he cuts short her free girlhood. Meantime, he has a free field for his wooing, and I don't think there are many girls who are heart free, and yet could withstand your cousin Bruce.' How much more need I tell you? I resolved to go away, but at the last I weakened. I could not resist her constant nearness, and, after I had almost committed myself, I fled her presence, and went to Bruce. I told him everything, and the generous fellow met me half-way; when I went abroad, there was an understanding between us. During my absence he was not to commit himself by word or deed, and when I returned, we were to make the chances even, and she was to choose between us. I went away; but I could neither rest nor forget! I had never believed before in such love as I have felt, and still feel for that girl. Every hour I spent in a foreign land was flat and stale; she was in my mind everywhere. As the last months of my probation were passing, I began to hear things that caused me to fear and chafe horribly: friends from home told me how often Bruce and Valentine were seen together, then came tales of other lovers; and finally, there came in a letter some words that burned into my brain: '*If I know the signs, Miss Valentine R. is losing her heart to your handsome cousin.*' My handsome cousin! I had never thought of Bruce as handsomer than the average man, and this is what I did, fool that I was and am. I took one of his pictures, recently made, and a very good one, and showed it to some young ladies whom I knew in Rome. There was but one voice. It was pronounced 'handsome,' 'splendid,' 'a noble head,' 'a manly face,' and so on, *ad libitum*. Then I met my old flame in Paris, and she told me that rumour had given them to each other. I resolved to come home then. A few weeks later we met again; I had not heard much from home for weeks; some letters, it was thought, had been lost, or mis-sent, I moved about so restlessly, and she told me then that my father was ill, that he had given up his place down town. I knew if my father was ill enough to give up his business, that he must be ill indeed, and I grew still more anxious—that was about the time of my father's first serious breakdown, and before I had decided to start, I received news from home direct: my father was better, but was going east soon to consult the physicians, and Valentine Rodney was going away also. The time of probation had not yet expired, and so I resolved to wait."

He stopped a moment and sighed long and heavily.

"You can guess the rest," he concluded wearily; "I wrote her eagerly that I was coming home, changed my plans slightly, and

wrote again,—I set out—arrived—what—do I find? After the shock of the wreck I am taken aside, as kindly as possible, and told that my cousin is accused of murder,—that my father is threatened with a serious illness,—and Valentine—the time of our probation, Bruce's and mine, will soon expire, but, even before this last terrible calamity, I knew that I was in honour bound to silence. She met me with the sweetest shyness, and, for the few moments before I heard of Joe Matchin's death, I was foolishly happy. And now—doctor, more than once since you saw me first, I have *lost* myself utterly—not with the haze of fever, but an actual annihilation of self. I fear this strange relaxing of the mental faculties; I fear the strange thoughts and fancies that now and then, for only a moment, but a *fearful* moment, catch and cling and clog about my brain. Tell me, what have I to fear, doctor? and *what* have I to *hope?*"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BRENDA AND MURTAGH MAKE TERMS.

"THESE are my terms, madam, the *only* terms upon which I can enter upon this case."

"But—are they not unusual?"

"Perhaps; and I think the *case*, in some respects, may prove unusual. Candidly, Mrs. Deering, I believe you will find in the end that this plan will have spared you much. In short, it's the *only* way, I can accept no other."

Detective Murtagh and Brenda Deering were sitting in Mr. Baird's study face to face, with a small table containing writing materials and some books between them; and Mr. Baird, a little aloof and in the background, a witness and listener, at the request of both. Brenda had formally preferred her request, and Murtagh had been making known his "terms" at some length. They had been, as she has said, somewhat unusual, and not at all to her liking. And now—as she hesitates, reluctant to accept them, yet growing more and more anxious to secure his aid, and confident of his ability, she turns to Mr. Baird.

"Tell me," she appeals to him; "will this really be best? Do you advise me to fold my hands and close my eyes, and let this man come into my house and take control? Would *you* do likewise in my position?"

"Candidly, Mrs. Deering, I see no better way; no way so good, in fact. In your position I would accept Mr. Murtagh's terms."

Again she was silent for long moments, with her eyes bent upon the floor. Then she lifted her head with a quick, almost haughty movement.

"I accept," she said firmly; "and I have just thought of a strong reason why I should."

"Then," said the detective, "that we may quite understand each other, may we hear this reason?"

"It has just occurred to me," she replied in the same firm, half-haughty manner, "that, as one of the inmates of Beechwood, who are to come under your eye, sir, I am, of course, open to suspicion, like the others, and, until you have decided upon my guilt or innocence, you cannot confer with me upon the subject of your work. If, as has been intimated, I am hiding a guilty knowledge, you must not put me on my guard by informing me of your progress."

An odd smile lurked behind the false moustache that adorned Murtagh's shrewd face, as he replied:

"If you *are* 'hiding a guilty knowledge,' Mrs. Deering, you are doing it faultlessly; and now, if you please, we will arrange our plans, so far as we can at present; I shall prefer that we do not need to hold a second meeting, not for some days at least. You are sure that you understand all clearly?—That I am to manage your case *exclusively;* that I am to enter your house in some capacity, and am to carry on my work independently, only conferring with you when I wish your co-operation; and that, in the meantime, I am to employ such assistants as I may think fit, and am to work out the case *unquestioned* until such time as I find it wise, or needful, to make known anything that I may discover; and that you will not require a report from me until I *succeed*, or am convinced that I *cannot* succeed? You agree, in the presence of Mr. Baird, to all this?"

"I agree to all," she replied firmly, "asking, only, if there shall be a limit as to time?"

"If the person who poisoned your husband *is under your roof*, Mrs. Deering, I promise to discover it before a month passes; perhaps *not* with all the *proof* we shall need before I can denounce, or declare the truth; but, if I have not fixed my suspicion upon someone by that time, I shall remove my seat of operations, and search for my quarry outside of your house. And now, let me consider, upon my part, what I can do to relieve you of suspense. First, I will work in a manner as little disturbing to you as possible; I will devote my *every* energy to your case, and I will, when I have fixed upon a subject for suspicion, let you know that I have made such a beginning; for it is, as you must know, one thing to suspect, to gather, and hold, clues, and quite another, and more difficult, to acquire *proof* strong enough to stand in a court of law. So I will not *name* the suspected person—unless—"

"Unless—" she broke in quickly—"unless that suspected person should be myself!"

Ferriss Murtagh leaned across the little table, and looked straight into her eyes.

"Mrs. Deering," he said, slowly and with quiet dignity, "when I discover, or believe, *you* to be worthy of *suspicion*, I will *tell you so*, and withdraw from the case! Even a detective can be a gentleman, and—he does *not* hunt down his employer."

A hot flush swept her face, but she met his gaze resolutely. "Pardon me," she said simply, "I did not realise how you *must* take that speech. When you *tell* me that I am guilty, you will doubtless have found your proof. In the meantime, how do you intend to enter my house, to become one of the household, and not be known or suspected?"

"I will tell you—but, first, how many of your household know the truth?"

"Four, including myself."

"Very well; in, say two days, Mr. Baird here will make it known to these, yourself included, that a detective is in Beechwood, and looking into the case. In due time it may be well to have some person, say an agent, a tramp, or some stranger of inquiring mind appear and become more or less conspicuous: a dummy detective, in fact; it is sometimes necessary and helpful to set up a 'pigeon,' a sham detective whose movements may be as mysterious as we please, and who can be watched *ad libitum* while the *bona-fide* detective works on undiscovered. You comprehend?"

"Quite."

"I think, too, that I may have to ask you to make some change in, or to enlarge, your family; carefully, of course, and with reasons for such changes which must be patent to all."

"It shall be done, when I am shown the way."

"Thanks. And now, for myself, Mrs. Deering, do you happen to have any relative, distant and not likely to appear in Pomfret for a time, an uncle in South America or out West, or a second cousin, elderly and socially inclined? I *must* become a member of your household, in some sort, and the character of a relative would afford me excellent opportunities."

"I see," she said musingly, and then after a brief consideration she looked across at Mr. Baird, caught his eye, and they spoke together.

"Uncle Nat?" she said to him.

"Your Uncle Nat!" said he.

Murtagh smiled. "It sounds promising," he said. "May I ask who Uncle Nat is?"

There was a faint smile upon Brenda's face as she replied, "Uncle Nat, or Nathan R. Holly, is an uncle of my mother's, and he must be now about sixty-six years old; yes, quite that, for he was sixteen years older than she, and she would be fifty if she were living now. My mother was an orphan at ten years of age; and she lived with the Hollys, her mother's family, until one of the aunts married, against the wishes of her people. Mother was then fourteen, and she elected to cast in her lot with this aunt. She never went back to the Hollys, and I have never seen any of the family except this aunt, and Uncle Nat. He is unmarried, and considered eccentric."

"Good!" broke in the detective. "Has he ever visited Beechwood?"

"Once."

"Oh! then he would be remembered by some of your household?"

"I think not. His stay was so short, only for a day. He was hardly seen by the servants, except for the maid who served at dinner, and she is not here now, and by Mrs. Merton, who can't see half across the room without spectacles, and who only had glimpses of him at best. He came in Mr. Deering's waggon from the station, and went in the same manner; as for the young men and Miss Rodney, they were away, all of them—at school."

"How long since that visit?"

"It was the summer of my marriage—five years ago almost."

"Does he correspond with you?"

"He writes to everyone of his relatives twice a year a letter of half-a-dozen lines, and always the same, informing us that he 'yet lives,' of the state of his health, present and past, that he is still a 'sensible single man,' and lastly, his address for the time."

"Will you describe him?"

"Not far from your height, with a slight stoop and a decided limp of the right leg, hair grey, very thick and worn longer than common, whiskers at side of face, also bushy grey and short, big moustache. Wears glasses, and was always rolling and smoking very mild cigarettes; a great talker, and given to asking questions—rather prying in fact; fond of arguing, and of giving advice; quite wealthy, but very stingy and addicted to the wearing of shabby clothing."

"Capital!" cried the detective, "it *could* not be better! And he is now—"

"In California when last heard from."

"One thing more, Mrs. Deering. I want, right away, a plan of your house, with the names of the occupants written in each bedroom space. Let it be upon a large sheet of bristol, and do not omit *a single detail.* Indicate with especial clearness all connecting doors and passages above stairs; can you do this?"

"I think so. I can draw a little, and have drawn a plan now and then."

"Mrs. Deering," broke in the banker, "is very skilful with pen, pencil, or colours, and has a nice taste for architecture. The newer, and, I may say, the better, part of Beechwood, as it now stands, was planned by her."

"That is good! I feel encouraged; with such a start as this, and with such a *rôle* to play, I can ask for nothing more for myself. Now, Mrs. Deering, if I should ask you to dismiss one of your maids, what one would you choose to dispense with? Mind I do not wish you to make such a change *now*, but I may require it later, and—it will help me to know beforehand what servant we shall have to replace."

"I understand," she answered quietly; "you wish to put a woman of your own choosing in the vacant place. My servants are all good, all faithful, or so I believe, and if possible, I will ask you to choose for yourself the place you may wish made vacant."

Again a look of satisfaction crossed the face of the detective. For some reasons her answers pleased him, but he only said, "In that case we will let 'Uncle Nat Holly' choose when the time comes. And by the way, Mr. Holly is too far off; we must transfer him to, let us say, Boston; will that do?"

"It was his native place," replied Brenda.

"*Very* good! Then, Mrs. Deering, you may look to hear from your Uncle Holly within a day or two, and to see him a little later."

And so, after a few more words of instruction and precaution, they separated, and Brenda Deering, sleeplessly pacing her room late that night, faced the fact that, alone, and unaided, she must play a hard part, must open her doors to this strange peremptory man, and let in, not himself alone, but such others as he might choose, to supplant her

faithful people. And not even Bruce and Brook Deering, nor yet her best friend, Valentine, might know the truth concerning this man whom she had put into power, and whom she had promised to obey blindly.

"It must all be borne!" she murmured, standing at her window, and looking out, through the midnight starshine, to the woods beyond, where a long train was wending its way with rumble and roar, and occasional flashings from its lamps, as it wound about the long curves where the train had been wrecked less than a month ago. Looking back to that time it seemed, to her, far in the past. "And I believed, *that night*, that I was bearing much!—that my position was a hard one," she thought. "How could I guess,—but it has reached the worst *now*. And somehow, from somewhere, I must find strength to bear it!" Suddenly she sprang away from the window and drew the curtain close. Her eyes were wide and startled, and her hand shook as it grasped the heavy drapery. "What was *that?*" She crossed the room swiftly, turned out the light and went cautiously back to the open window, avoiding the slightest sound, and dropping upon her knees she drew the curtain a little way apart and looked cautiously out. She had seen, she was *sure*, she had seen a figure come out from the shadow of a clump of shrubbery, stand for a moment there, and suddenly draw back again with the effect of vanishing, being swallowed up by the great dark mass at its back.

She waited, it seemed to her many long minutes, her hand clutching the curtain, her breath coming quickly. Her window faced the south, and commanded a view of the rear half of the great lawn and rose garden on that side, but the front of the lawn and the south gate were shut from her gaze by the jutting south-west wing, in which were situated the rooms of the two young men, and some great chambers. Below her stretched a broad balcony, covering a part of the conservatory, and at one side sheltering the entrance which communicated most directly with the library. While she looked eagerly, with a strange agitation and impatience, she kept her place, and, to her strained gaze, it seemed that the mass of bushes rustled now and then, and quivered, as if agitated by some unquiet presence among its slender bending branches, and inwardly she was saying over and over, "*Who* can it be?" Not a burglar. She never thought that possible; she would not have spent a short ten seconds watching the movements of a possible burglar with the anxiety and suspense with which she watched the place where the shadowy form had vanished. Her house was burglar proof, if the best of modern appliances could make it so. And she would have turned the espionage of a burglar over to a servant without an instant's loss of time. But *this!* "*Who* is it?" She almost hears the question repeat itself in the air abou her, so intently, so earnestly does she propound it to herself, and then herself makes answer—"It was a *woman!*"

Yes, *that* is why she looks, and waits, and wonders fearfully. The figure seen for a moment, and through the gloom that she can but just penetrate, is the draped figure of a woman.

And now, when some long minutes have actually passed, hours she almost thinks them, something causes her to start, and almost to cry out; she has never once taken her eyes from that clump of bushes

near the corner of the wing, and she has not seen the figure which glides silently forward, from beneath her very window, it would seem, until it has crossed half the space visible to her between the balcony beneath and the bushes, which are surely rustling now. Yes! and the draped figure emerges again! The two figures meet, seem to blend for a moment as one, and then both vanish again behind the sheltering bushes.

A long time she sits watching, wondering, dazed. The figures do not reappear, though an hour passes, and she sits and waits, and thinks strange thoughts, makes wild guesses.

Finally she gets up, lets the curtain fall and relights her lamp, which burns on brightly until day dawns golden and fair, and the troubled mistress of Beechwood sinks to sleep just as the sun peeps out, and the young birds begin to twitter in their nests not far from her now darkened window.

And her last waking thought was this: "I shall not TRY to unravel it! I will tell it to that man at the first possible moment! That and *all the rest.* I *will not* bear it alone another day!"

Morning and second thought found her in the same mind, and in spite of the fact that they had decided not to meet again until "Uncle Nat" should appear at Beechwood, Brenda rang at the door of the banker's house before the luncheon hour, and, after some waiting, was once more admitted to the presence of Detective Murtagh, who was snugly quartered in an upstair room, secluded but cosy, where she found him writing busily, but ready to listen to the long story, which was not in some of its details so new to him as one might suppose from his manner of hearing it.

"Mrs. Deering," he said, when she had told him the story of the previous night, and followed it up with still other revelations, "you would have blocked our wheels, and, perhaps, hindered our progress more than a little, if you had kept this back; and you have told me, to-day, that which may prove of more use, of more value, to me, than all that has gone before! And now, let me beg of you, if there is anything else, *anything*, however remote, that concerns any of these interested parties, anything unusual, or that seems to you in the least degree peculiar, do not keep it from me. The slightest hint of all may contain the key of the whole business. Is there anything more?"

He was standing before her, alert and earnest, and his eyes searched her face.

"There *is* something more!" he said, when he had waited a long moment for her to speak. "Remember, please, our plan is the chain —one missing link, and the rest breaks and fails us."

She got up quickly, and threw back her head, "There is *one* thing," she began, "which, in the strangeness and excitement of yesterday, I did not remember until later, and then I thought it would not be essential, would have no bearing upon the case. I will let you hear it, now, and when you have heard it, you will have all, absolutely *all*, that I can tell you."

And standing erect before him she related the story of the document placed in her hands by her husband weeks before his death, and missing on the day of his burial.

"And you thought *this* non-essential?—of no bearing upon the case? Mrs. Deering, you have barely escaped a serious error! You have just now enabled me, for *the first time*, to put my hand upon something tangible! Do me another favour."

"Name it then."

"Go home, and, as calmly as you can, think over this interview,—the one during which that paper was put into your hand. Try to recall every word, *everyone*, and, if you can write them down, so much the better. Omit no word that *in any way* concerned that paper: can you do this?"

"I will do it," she said firmly, "I have no other wish than to help you in any way."

"You *are* helping me, *much;* first, with the plan of the house, next, with this memoranda of your interview, and, last, with another piece of writing, which I shall find most useful for reference. Will you write me out, as clearly and as fully as you can, a description of your servants, their names, where they have lived, anything you may know of their parents, or relatives of any sort; *all* that you know of their lives before they came to you, and especially, of their misdeeds, faults, habits, good or bad, and any quarrels or enmities that may exist among them. This may seem strange to you, and, if we could meet, and talk freely, and at all times, it would not be needful; but 'Uncle Holly' must be above suspicion as much as Cæsar's wife. It will be a dull labour, perhaps a tedious one."

"It will help me over a few of the hours which are all tedious, those spent in effortless thinking doubly so. You shall have the plan of the house to-night, through the hands of Mr. Redding, who comes to advise with my Cousin Valentine concerning her business interests, and the others as soon as possible. I can add to my knowledge concerning the servants by a few judicious questions and a little delay."

"Take your own way and time," he said. And then, as she was about to go—"Mrs. Deering," he added, earnestly, "I am going to ask you to let this burden that you are trying to bear almost alone, slip, as much as can be, from your shoulders, and to try and feel, through the days of suspense that are before you, a little faith in *me*, in my good intentions, my zeal in your service, and in the hope I now have, that the mysteries shall be cleared up and the truth be known at last. Trust me, and be patient. Somewhere there is a solution for every problem, an answer for every riddle."

———

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A LUMP OF WAX.

ON the afternoon of the same day, and while Brenda Deering was making the first outlines of her plan of Beechwood, Tom Wells, sauntering along the side street which bounded the Baird stables, was not a little surprised to see the rear door of the carriage-house open, and the face of "Baird's new man" look out and smile a welcome,

while the lips hailed a hearty "Hallo, Wells, come aboard, can't you?"

Accepting this free and easy invitation with pleased alacrity, Wells soon found himself following the detective, who was making his way upstairs, to the snug room which was as much at his disposal as ever.

"I'm glad you happened along, Wells," Murtagh said, as he closed the door and turned the key with a quick snap; "I was just about to sally out and look around a bit; been doing a little horse trading for the boss, and come around to give him some points on the business, see?" And he laughed easily as he tossed some flotsam from the nearest chair to the floor. "Take that seat and be comfortable: I want to know how all is going in Pomfret. No more murders, I suppose?"

"No." Wells shook his head glumly. "But a mighty unfortunate *death*, all the same: Judge Deerin', Mr. Baird's pardner,—but of course *you* know all about it?"

Murtagh was wrestling with the knotted ribbon of a small cigar box, and he worked at it briskly, while he said, quite ignoring this last supposition,

"I've only just come, you know, and have not seen much of Baird." He turned, with the open box in his hand, to feel along a shelf for matches, and then proffered the box. "Have one, Wells, and light up, it's more social. And so—the great man of Pomfret is dead. Was it sudden?"

To make a confidant of Wells was no part of Murtagh's plan, but he meant to learn as much as he might concerning Lysander Deering from every source. He had talked much with Mr. Baird, who could only speak of his murdered friend in words of unqualified praise, and he wanted to get a different point of view, such a point of view as a man like Wells would be likely to adopt in drawing a mental photograph of a man like Lysander Deering.

"Well! it *was* sudden; and it *wasn't*. He'd been ailin', ye see, but nobody thought the danger was so closte. I've heard't his widder takes it cool as a cucumber; and't his boy, young feller'd, jest got home from the old country, is nearly broke to pieces."

"So?" Murtagh seemed to meditate. "I wonder now if his death will affect the Matchin affair in any way?"

Wells grinned. "Well, if *you* can't tell *that*, I can't," he said.

This was Murtagh's opportunity, and he followed it up; but from privileged friend and humble admirer the tale was much the same. They talked of Lysander Deering for a long hour, and the detective led his witness very cleverly through a maze of information dating far back and covering much of the history which, even when well guarded, is sure to "leak out" when the subject is well known, well loved, or well hated, and the town, like Pomfret, is too small to have passed that stage where our neighbours' affairs and our own are almost identical. Wells was a natural news-gatherer, and, when he chose, an interesting, unprejudiced, and lucid gossip. But when he had expatiated long upon the career of Mr. Deering, since the institution of the Pomfret Bank and up to the present time; when Murtagh had heard much of his charity, his public spiritedness, his popularity, his business

ability and noble-mindedness, the detective was forced to interject a question.

"Wells, do you mean to tell me that the man *never* made an enemy, to your knowledge? Why, it's beyond belief! And he a business man, and *rich!*"

"Well *now!*" Wells opened his eyes very wide, and paused to think. "I believe now't you bring it up to me, as 'twere, that there *was* a little talk once, quite a while ago, about some sort of coolness between Mr. Deerin' and Square Wardell 'bout some little matter of business. I never heard the rights of it; but Square Wardell was a closte man in deal, an' nobody doubted but that Deerin' had refused to help him pinch mor'n his share out of somethin' or somebody. Anyhow, they wasn't friendly no more like they was at first. Never was agin, I guess. Wardell died a couple of years afterwards. But the young folks never took part in the fallin' out; *they* 'peared to be pretty good friends all round."

"Naturally," assented the detective, and then he changed the subject. "What is gossip saying now about the Matchin affair, Wells? Does the interest continue?"

"You can trust Carton for *that;* every few days he sets some little story afloat, and the gulls fasten on to it tooth and nail. He don't mean to let folks git worryin' and wonderin' why somethin' ain't *done.* He's all'ys findin' a new clue or bein' mysterious over some 'nonymous letter. He's been away from here twice to look at some tramp or suspect that was s'posed to a hailed from Pomfret some time or other. Once he heard of a woman over on the branch road that had talked to a stranger, a sort of genteel tramp, the night of the murder, and he went right off to see her." He paused a moment, glanced up at the other, as if to gauge his interest, and then added with a queer intonation: "*He* wa'n't the *only* one."

"Ah!" Murtagh saw his cue. "Who were the others, Wells? Yourself for one, I daresay?"

"Yes, me—and Jonas Wiggins."

"Together?"

Wells grinned. "Great minds flow in the same channels, ye know."

"Tell me about it, Wells."

"Ye see the woman, when she first heard of the murder, and for some time after, didn't know the date of it. Heard it wrong I s'pose. But one day she heard when it happened, and then she remembered how a young man had stopped to her house, and asked for some bread and milk. He said he was going to Rossdale, she said—you know that's only four miles from this; an' from the pint where this woman lives he would a had to cross the main road to Pomfret within half a mile from the town line—"

"One moment, Wells, when did this come out?—the woman's story?"

"Less than a week after you left, sir."

"I see! Go on."

"Well—I guess I was about the first one to hear it. 'Twas told at the blacksmith's place down near the creek, by one of the woman's neighbours, and one of the men standin by says, right out, 'That's news to carry to Sheriff Carton, an' *I*'m goin' to see him.'"

"And—he went?"

"Yes. He went. Fact is we both left the forge 'bout the same time. I'm pretty brisk on the walk, and *I* got home in jest ten minits. I had shot a couple of birds that mornin' calculatin' to have 'em for dinner; but I jest took 'em an' stuck 'em into my game bag, shouldered my gun an' set off. I knew the man that told the yarn to the forge, an' where he lived, an' he had spoke the widder's name, so I jest cut acrost a lot of fields—'twas a good seven miles by the road—an' I found the widder's place easy enough. Ye see I had calculated that Carton—if he come at all, an' I reckoned he would—would not start for a seven mile trip until after dinner. An' I was right. I found the widder alone, come up with my best bow, asked for a drink of water, and made her a present of my two birds. She was mightily pleased, an' I got to talkin' with her real easy. Well, I guess you don't want to hear all we both said, though," with a broad smile, "'twas considerable interestin'. 'Twas most noon, an' I hung on till she said that she wasn't gittin' no dinner, bein' alone jest then, her children off to school, an' her hired man a changin' work with a neighbour; but wouldn't I like a drink of milk, or a piece of apple pie? Now, sir, I *like* apple pie, but I didn't yield to no such temptation. I jest thanked her kindly, and told her that *pie* didn't agree with me much, but, if she didn't mind the trouble, I'd be awfully obleeged for some *bread and milk*. Of course I got it, an' eatin' it in her kitchen give me the chance to draw her out about tramps an' the like, and pretty soon I had the whole story, about the last man that she had given bread and milk to, and how she feared that maybe she had helped a burglar, or worse, for it was that very night that Joe Matchin had been killed in the Pomfret Bank."

"Did she describe him?"

"As well as she could; he was young, she was sure, he was lame, and he wore glasses. His hair was light, and he wore light whiskers that almost covered his face. When I pressed her to know if there was anything about him that she remembered *particular*, she said, after some thinkin', that his voice was very soft and pleasant, and kind of slow spoken, and she believed she'd *know* it again *anywhere*."

"Ah!" ejaculated the detective, then checked himself to let the narrator complete his story.

"By that time we had got quite sociable like, and I jest give her a little friendly advice. I told her that, like's not, if the sheriff found out that she'd had such a visitor he'd be a comin' to see her, and it *might* make her a lot of trouble if they caught the feller, and she went and testified agin him, and then it turned out, as it *might*, that he wa'n't the man, she'd jest make an enemy; and that these tramps was all kind a clanned together, and it *might* git her into trouble. I advised her, *strong*, *not to recollect too much* about the feller if anyone come pryin', 'because,' says I, 'you're a lone woman, an' it stan's you in hand not to make yourself no more enemies than you can help.' Well, she took the bait. Jone Wiggins was there closte after me, but he didn't learn much, and then, after dinner, Carton arrived. He must a pumped pretty hard, for she told me afterward that he hung on so long't she had to tell him something, so she jest told him that the feller was a big

black-eyed feller, with freckles on his face, and I s'pose Carton's looking for them black eyes and freckles yet."

"I hope you didn't scare the woman too badly, Wells; we *might* want to use her, you know."

"Oh! I'm keepin' up the acquaintance," smiled Wells; "she won't go back on *me!*"

"Good! We may never find the young man with the limp and the soft voice, and he may not be our man; but the spectacles and the whiskers do look like a disguise—and now, about Wiggins?"

"Well, I don't know what *he* expects to gain by it, but Wiggins is neglectin' his favourite grog-shops a good deal, and is dividin' his time 'twixt Carton's headquarters and spyin' about the Beechwood premises. He's tryin' to scrape acquaintance with some of the servants, and he looks pretty sharp after Bruce Deerin's goin's and comin's, too."

"He does! Well, Wells, I'm going to ask *you* to try a little of that game. If I could keep up this character a week or two longer, I would do the work myself, or at least start it for you; as it is, I want *you* to strike up a better acquaintance with some of the Wardell servants."

"The—*Wardells!*" Wells looked his surprise.

"Exactly—the Wardell servants. I can't go into details now, Wells, and I know you won't ask it, but you've offered your service to me—"

"To assist in *the Matchin case*, — yes, sir," broke in Wells suggestively.

The detective smiled. "Just so, Wells," he said amiably; "and I want you to take notice that I never have, and never shall ask, you to go outside of that case, without making all plain to you. It's the Matchin case that's at the bottom of all this. That case has been dragging on for weeks, with very little to show for the time that's passed. Up to this time, in one way and another, I've been hampered, and forced to move carefully, and sometimes to stand still; but I've got things fixed *now* to suit me; and I'm going to start in fresh! The fact is, I've had, all along, a theory that I didn't *dare* venture to propound to *anyone* until I had got my hand upon something tangible. It's a queer theory, but it hangs together; that is, it will if I can prove my first premises; and, if we ever work it out, it will amaze some of the knowing people who have 'known all along' who killed Matchin, and who are only waiting to cry, 'I told you so!' at the finish. That's all I can tell you yet, Wells; and now, do you help me as aforesaid? or do I go it alone?"

"Oh, I'm with you all right! Only, I can't see how the Wardell—"

"Look here, Wells; do you remember what you told the coroner at the inquest?"

"About—"

"About your meeting Miss Wardell, or seeing her, in the grounds—?"

"Certain."

"She was listening to the disturbance, and stood near a small arbour, which, of course, was very dark?"

"Yes."

"And she spoke as if to a servant, who, you said, or intimated, was behind her in the arbour?"

"That's so!"

"Did you *see* the servant?"

"'Course not!"

"Hear him—or her?"

"No, sir."

"Then you don't *know* that anyone was there?"

"Good lord, man! What are you driving at?"

"I want you, if possible, to learn *what* servant was in the arbour just back of Miss Wardell."

"Cæsar!" ejaculated Wells, "I'll be—" He checked himself suddenly. "I guess you'll think I'm more of an old woman than a detective," he finished with a sudden drop of his voice; "I'll do my *best*, captain, and begin right off. Anything else?"

"Yes. I don't expect to be here often, or for long; I'm supposed to be, just now, out on Mr. Baird's stock farm, and that, of course, will account for my occasional appearance in Pomfret in my present character. To-morrow morning, early, I leave, and I may not see you again for days, possibly weeks; meantime, anything you may find out you can safely put in writing, to be destroyed as soon as read, and place the paper in care of Mr. Baird, who is all the time in communication with me, or will be soon. One thing more. I want you to come here to-night at early dark, but not until dark, and we will take a little walk together. That's all, Wells! And now I must show myself about town for a bit." He turned toward the door, but Wells put out a detaining hand.

"One minit," the latter said, with something almost of dignity in his manner. "'Twon't be no hard task to find out what you want to know, I recken, and lest you should think I've been too uncommon smart, I may as well tell ye that the man that takes care of the Wardell gardens and grounds, and is sort of head man about the place, is an acquaintance of mine, and has been for years. We often smoke a pipe, and have a talk together, when he is off duty an' about town. So I guess I'll be able to find out somethin' before very long, maybe before to-night."

"So much the better," replied the detective, and the two men promptly separated.

. . . . . .

"Well," began Wells when they came together that evening, once more in the "den" above the carriage house, where they tarried, to come to a better understanding before setting out in company, whither, Tom Wells had not the faintest idea,—"Well, captain, it 'pears I counted my chickens afore they hatched—sort of. I've seen my man."

"Already?"

"Yes, met him slap, idle and with plenty of time for a chat."

"Well?"

"Well, I thought I managed the thing prime, but when I sprung my question, kind a offhand, as I thought would be best with him, he jest played bluff out and out!"

"Explain, Wells."

"Well, he didn't deny *knowing*, nor he didn't take no offence. He jest *refused to answer!*"

"Refused!"

"Exactly! flat and square!"

"But *how,* man? Tell me what he said?"

"That's jest the queerest part of it. Mind ye, we're good friends—friends from 'way back, him and me; and I put my question plum, jest as if 'twas my curiosity. 'Hank,' says I—we had got on to the Matchin case you know, to sort of lead up to it—'Hank,' I says, 'ye know I saw Miss Wardell that night, and I thought 'twas sort of queer you didn't show yourself, 'stead of standin' back in that dark arbour, or, *wasn't* it you 'twas with her?' Well, sir, Hank looked up at me kind o' curious and he says, 'Wells,' he says, 'I don't want to 'pear blunt nor short with ye; but—I *can't* answer ye that.' 'Answer what?' says I, kind of surprised like. 'Whether I was in that arbour or wasn't,' he says, and then I let on to be sort of miffed, and he sort of come down, and says he, 'We're good friends, Tom, and I'll tell ye jest how it *is*. *She* asked me, and, I guess, all the rest, *not to answer any questions* about that night. And *I promised.*' Then I see my cue, and I says, 'Well, 'tain't surprisin', I s'pose she didn't want to run no risk of bein' called on to come into court, maybe, jest 'cause she happened to come out in her own yard, with one of her own folks; 'twa'n't as if she had anything really to tell;' and Hank tumbled right into the trap. 'That's jest what she *said*,' says he."

"Good!" Murtagh struck a hand upon his thigh to emphasise the exclamation. "*Good!* Wells, you *couldn't* have done better!"

"Couldn't, hey!" Wells stared in surprise. "Well, that beats *me!*" apostrophising all space about him. "Asks me to find out a thing, and when I fail flat, he hollers good!"

"But you have *not* failed, man! You've *succeeded!* You've put the first link into my hand! But there, I can't explain—come along, man, I want to go over the 'scene of the tragedy,' as they say in the newspapers, and then I want you to show me the route you took, the place where you stood when you talked with Miss Wardell, and some other little landmarks."

They did not tarry long about the bank building, but, starting from the front, as Wells had done on the night of the murder, they approached the Wardell mansion. The front of the house was brightly lighted, but in the library all was darkness, and the grounds upon the south side of the house were black with shadows in spite of the moon, visible but obscure.

"Can you see the arbour?" whispered Wells.

"Of course. Now, Wells, let's go back to the bank; you say there was no moon that night?"

"Not a moon."

"And but faint starlight?"

"That's it."

"Now let's begin at the steps of the bank and suppose that we have just rushed out and are making for a place of concealment. Look around you, Wells (we must run eastward for some reason), look *sharp*, and tell me how would *you* go from here across the street, if you would not be seen?"

Wells caught his breath sharply. He was beginning to understand.

'Cæsar!" he muttered, and stepped quickly to a tall, old maple tree which reared itself to the top of the stone steps, and threw a sombre shadow all the way across the street, and even beyond the low iron railing enclosing the Wardell grounds on that side.

"I see what you're driving at," he whispered, excitedly. "Jiminy! Why, he'd run right acrost in the shade of this big maple, and, if he wanted to, he'd jump that little fence, and keep right on in the shade of that row of trees, right up to the arbour! What's to hinder?"

"What, indeed?" responded the detective, dryly. "I've said the same to myself more than once. Let's cross."

They crossed the street again and stood together beside the low railing. They were between the great house and the church; the one facing the east, and the other looking westward, and after a moment, in which they took note of the quiet and absence of life all about them, the detective said scarcely above his breath,

"Wells, suppose you were concealed in that arbour, and I outside, as *you* were that night, and that you knew instant concealment to be your only safety; now, leaving locks and bolts out of the question, where would you most naturally look for shelter, knowing every moment precious?"

"*Man!*" Wells made a sudden movement of recoil, and then caught him by the arm. "Man *alive!*" he sibilated, "I *see* what you mean! *The Church!*"

"The church!" replied the other, "to be sure! And *you* never thought of it before! Why, 'man alive,' every day since that murder this big pile has stood here saying to every passer-by who ever thought or wondered over Joe Matchin's fate,—'*Ask me!* ASK ME!'"

"Oh, it *has!*" Wells recovered himself, and his *aplomb* rapidly. "And how long since it began making that remark to *you* then?"

"From the first moment, when, having heard of the killing, and the escape, and of the ringing of the alarm bell, I looked out from that window over there and saw this big, empty, silent place. I wonder, yes, *marvel*, that it didn't occur to every man in that room!"

"Jiminy!" It was all Wells had to offer.

"Come this way." The detective took his arm and led him down the street until they had turned the corner, and stood before the broad stone steps. "Let's sit here," he said.

They seated themselves upon one of the broad flags midway up the flight, and, for a few moments, Murtagh spoke low and rapidly, Wells responding with an interjectional word here and there. Finally, there came a moment of silence, and both seemed listening intently.

"There's no one coming, at least," said Murtagh; "wait here one moment, Wells." He arose and seemed to fumble for a moment in his pocket, then he ascended the steps above him, and groped in the darkness about the great door of entrance. His movements were silent, and he was soon back beside his companion, who had kept his place upon the step, not so much as turning his head.

"Come," said Murtagh, "I've got what I came for; let's go back to my den."

When they were again in the "den," and a light was flickering upon the table, the detective carefully unwrapped from his handkerchief a

lump of soft wax, and laid it gently upon a sheet of paper as far as possible from the lamp.

"There!" he said, with a gesture toward it, "that, I suppose, I might call my first active move in the game!"

Wells came a step nearer the table and scrutinised the queer object.

"Might one ask what that 'move,' as you call it," nodding toward the lump of wax, "might be?"

"*That!* Why, don't you see, man? That is an impression, and a very good impression, considering, of the key-hole of the lock upon the door of St. Mark's Church."

CHAPTER XXXV.

UNCLE NAT.

UNCLE NAT HOLLY arrived duly. "Came, saw, and conquered."

The letter announcing his arrival was received by Mrs. Deering a short time before dinner; she had complained of a headache earlier in the day, and she entered the dining-room, where the entire household were assembled, looking unusually pallid and weary. When dessert was before them, and she had sent away the servants, she drew the letter from her girdle, and put it into Doctor Ware's hand.

"Doctor," she said, smiling with an evident effort, "I have but now received this letter: it is not private, and concerns, in a way, all of us; will you read it for the benefit of all?"

Doctor Ware took the letter without question, and with perfect readiness, and, before anyone could interpose, question, or comment, began to read:

"BOSTON, *June 29th*, 1887.

"MY DEAR NIECE BRENDA,—This to tell you that I am still in the land of the living, and that my health is good, but not so good that I could not wish it better. The west, in fact, seems not to agree with me, and I have been advised to leave it, which I proceeded to do last month. I have also been advised to try life in the country, or in some suburban town for a time, and as you have more than once, in the past, urged me to tarry under your hospitable roof, I have determined, after some consideration, weighing all the pros and cons, and looking in the face all the advantages and disadvantages, to come to your little town and try a season of country quiet in the bosom of your amiable family. My wants, as you must know, are few and simple, and I shall endeavour to conform myself to the ways of your household. I breakfast, as you know, *invariably* at six o'clock, but I shall not ask *you* to arise, or to call up your people at that hour; I am *quite* willing to breakfast in my own room, indeed, I think I shall prefer it.

"As I shall follow this letter in a day or two, I will not prolong it, but wishing well to all your household, and to yourself most particularly (as one of my own kin), I subscribe myself your affectionate relative,

NATHAN HOLLY.

"*N.B.*—I forgot to mention that I shall bring *my own* shower-bath. H."

As the doctor put down the letter there were smiles upon some of the faces about the table, but Brenda's was very grave. She had been toying with a tiny fruit knife, and she did not put it down, nor lift her eyes as she said after a moment's silence,

"You have heard the letter; I would like to hear from *all* of you—will the coming of another, of an almost stranger, at such a time as this, affect anyone disagreeably or in any manner interfere with that,

which is, just now, of foremost importance to us all? Bruce—Brook, what do you both think?"

Bruce turned a questioning glance toward Brook, and, after a moment, the latter spoke.

"We are not a cheery household," he said, "but Beechwood has always borne a reputation for hospitality. I am hardly fitted to perform the duties of host, but if Mr. Holly, of whom I have heard my father speak, or, was it you, Mrs. Deering?" turning his face toward Brenda—"if Mr. Holly is fond of quiet, and can content himself among us, why, let him come say I, eh—cousin?" turning from Brenda to Bruce.

"I quite agree with you," said Bruce quietly.

"Now, Valentine?" spoke Brenda.

"*I* see no objections! On the contrary, I think we *need* some outside influence; someone who does not know us so well that we may venture to throw off ceremony, and be at times as dull as we seem to feel." She turned toward Doctor Ware—"I speak, of course, for but *four* of us." She smiled. "Now, doctor, let *your* voice be heard."

Doctor Ware, whose eyes from the first had been looking through half-closed lids at the pale face of his hostess, now cast a glance around the table.

"Since my opinion has been asked," he ventured, "I will say that, first of all, it seems to *me*, we should know if the lady of the manor *desires* to receive this new guest—*her* relative?"

Brenda lifted her eyes quickly, "Speaking for myself alone," she said with decision, "while there are reasons that will make this visit just now almost a painful one, still, I should *not* like to refuse my hospitality, even now."

"Then," said the doctor promptly, "I feel free to say that it seems to me eminently *fitting* that, *just now*, a relative of Mrs. Deering, old enough to stand to her in the position of friend, protector, and adviser, should be in a position which enables him to come to her, and remain, even for a little time, under her roof."

"Right!" said Bruce Deering quickly.

"Quite right," added Brook, with a languid nod.

And so it was settled, and the way for Detective Murtagh's entrance into the house of mystery was made clear.

The next morning, as she was coming down the lower hall on her way to the housekeeper's domain, Brenda encountered Sarita, and paused to ask a question.

"Is Mrs. Merton busy now, Sarita?"

"Yes, madam. Something is a little amiss in the cold room, she is instructing them about the ice again."

Both women smiled their mutual understanding. Mrs. Merton was rigid in the matter and manner of using the ice in the room between the big cellars, where the milk, butter, fruit, and sundry other summer dainties were kept in cold storage; and new arrivals of fruit, butter, etc., must be put away under her own watchful eye.

"You know," added Sarita, still smiling, "the fruit from Lund & Co. came early this morning."

"Indeed!" Brenda turned back. "Then you may deliver my

message, Sarita, when you go down. Tell her that we are to have a guest, who may arrive very soon."

"A guest!" Sarita checked herself after uttering these two words, which had been accompanied with a sudden and quite perceptible start. "Pardon me—"

"And," went on the lady of Beechwood, "he may remain for some time. Mrs. Merton will, I think, remember him, and possibly you will also. Do you recall an old gentleman who paid us a short visit a few years ago, while the young people were all in school? He was my uncle, rather my mother's uncle, a Mr. Holly. I think Mrs. Merton will do well to be prepared for him to dine with us any evening after to-night, until he arrives, which may, indeed, be to-morrow."

Sarita's face wore a look almost like that of relief; but the pile of clean linen, which she held across her arm, was unsteady under the thin hand which held it in place.

"Yes, madam," she began hurriedly; "do you wish me to tell her what room shall be prepared for Mr.—Mr. Holly?" and then she added hastily, "I seem to recall the visit you name, it was short, was not it? I am *quite* sure I did not chance to see him."

"Possibly not." Brenda too drew a breath of relief, and then paused to consider a moment. "No, Sarita, we will let the room go. Uncle Holly, I remember, was quite fanciful about his surroundings. He was fond of an especial outlook, but I really can't remember if it was east, north, or west. There are rooms enough; I think it will please him to be allowed to *choose*."

"Ah! yes, madam."

Brenda had turned toward the front stairway, and Sarita, after standing a moment as she had been left, went also on her way. The hand lightly pressing down the snowy linen still trembled slightly, but the look upon her face, like that which Brenda now wore, was one of absolute relief.

"Ah-h-h!" she soliloquised, as she went briskly on, "for one minute I felt, oh, how startled! But this old uncle! all the better to have *him*, and even more in this lonely place. It's better for that poor lad! Poor lad—poor, poor lad!"

And Brenda was thinking, "She does not remember him. I thought as much, but am glad to be assured! As to the room, I am *sure* it is best to wait."

. . . . . .

On the morning after the interview with Tom Wells, Detective Murtagh left Pomfret by an early train, and three days later Mr. Nathan Holly arrived at the Pomfret station unheralded, and, it would seem, a trifle out of temper. He was a ruddy-faced old gentleman, with bushy white hair curling all about his head and standing out like a snowy halo, surrounding a face from which a pair of deep-set eyes looked out through large, round, orbed "nose glasses," and from under shaggy brows, that stood out, overshadowing even the glasses. There was a moustache, too, not quite so white as the hair and brows, but matching them in thickness, spreading out and terminating upon either cheek in short bushy whiskers, which left bare only the upper face and a prominent pink chin. He wore a wide-standing collar, and

a stock, white and none too fresh; and his dress was somewhat old-fashioned and a trifle shabby. His hands were gloved with precision; he wore a glossy silk hat, evidently lately brushed, and carried a gold-headed cane and a silver-handled umbrella; a new linen duster, noticeable for its wrinkles, hung over one arm, the hand grasping a small satchel; while the umbrella was stuck beneath the opposite arm, and its accompanying hand held the cane and two or three newspapers crushed together.

His first act upon skipping from the car steps to the platform was to look about him for a place whereon to deposit his satchel and duster, and having found it—in the form of a big box of "groceries," just disembarked, and about to be seized upon by a brawny, non-uniformed expressman, he dropped his burdens thereon, and hastened with evident anxiety to the door of the baggage car, from whence he returned a moment later beaming with satisfaction, and with a small Scotch terrier snugly tucked under the arm so lately disencumbered.

He seemed a very bustling old gentleman, and he put a hand to his ear when addressed, and spoke in that elevated tone common to most persons who are deaf, or "hard of hearing," and—before he had collected his luggage—which was considerable, including a big trunk, a valise large enough to hold the contents of a small trunk, a box of books, and a pair of travelling rugs, strapped and checked, not to mention the shower bath, and some few smaller belongings—it had been pretty well made known to all of Pomfret in and about the station that the new arrival was a guest for Beechwood, and that he was not a little surprised at the non-appearance of the Beechwood carriage.

"My niece certainly has failed to receive my letter," he declared, looking about him in high surprise, and murmuring an aside to the little dog, now comfortably curled into the crook of his master's elbow. "Fidèle, we must find a carriage, and we shall, no doubt, take Niece Brenda quite by surprise after all!"

And so, leaving his luggage behind, he finally departed in one of the town carriages, leaving a last injunction:—

"If anyone *should* arrive from Beechwood, after I go, you may let them take my luggage—*all* of it, and tell them to be *particularly* careful with the shower bath."

When Brenda Deering came down to receive her guest there were no traces in face, voice, or manner of the panic of dread and self-scorn that had shaken her half-an-hour since, as she stood face to face with the fact that, from the moment when this detective should cross her threshold, *she* became, not the lady of Beechwood and its lawgiver, but a hypocrite, carrying on—from morn to night, and day after day, in the house, which could be but a mockery of home henceforth—a part in a dark and hateful drama, a hard, exigent part in which the last act was still, to all alike, veiled in mystery.

To the very last she had resolutely held herself in check, and then had come that bad half-hour when, face to face with that which her own act had made inevitable, she gave way to the tempest—of horror, and impotent anger, at the fate that had so hemmed her in, so entangled, flouted, and tortured her.

But the storm had passed, and the die being cast, she faced the future, which was so full of suspense, with lips set in fine firm lines, and a heart which she had forbidden to falter or look back.

"We must run no risks, once I am under your roof," the detective had said, "and must not allow ourselves, at any time, to drop our characters, even for a moment; we may be alone, but, except when it *must* be done, let no words 'out of character' pass our lips between your walls; an occasional exchange of writing, even, would be safer."

And so it was from the first. "Uncle Holly" slid into his place in this strangely-assorted household, and the first dinner at which he assisted was pronounced by all to have been really an improvement upon many previous ones, since the crape had been removed from the great door, and the present family had gathered around the table at Beechwood.

It had been impossible for Doctor Ware, however great his desire, to keep the ball of conversation rolling, to create even the quietest social atmosphere about a table where the other four, despite their efforts, more or less spasmodic, were so overwhelmed with the gloom of the past and present. But "Uncle Nat," as he soon came to be called, was a strong ally and aid. He was sufficiently tactful, and, upon being informed of the recent calamity and loss which had overwhelmed Beechwood and its inmates, said neither too much nor too little, and was careful to avoid unpleasant repetitions. He was full of harmless chatter, and it soon became evident that he enjoyed his own discourse.

When proffered the choice of several rooms, he at once proved that Brenda had been wise in allowing him his choice.

On the night of his arrival he had occupied a room assigned him by Mrs. Merton without demur.

"Put me just where it suits you to-night, my dear," he said to Brenda with a benign smile; "and to-morrow, if you will allow me, I will look about a bit. I *am* a little inclined to like certain views, directions, etc.; especially I do *not* like the afternoon sunlight, nor a leafy window view *too* near; but wait—wait, till I look at your fine place at my leisure; you know I hardly did it justice before."

The choice he made on the following day was something of a surprise, even to Brenda. The wing, in the front of which the two young men were quartered, was a part of the original dwelling, and had been little changed when the repairs and alterations were made which transformed the north and eastern portion of the roomy and somewhat rambling house, into the "main building." In this part of the dwelling a long wide corridor ran from front to rear, above and below stairs, and, upon the second floor a second hall, crossing this at right angles, intersected, and ended, at the point where the passage in the west wing ran to the front, where, to the right, were Brook Deering's apartments; opposite them, to the left, the rooms set aside to Bruce, and, adjoining these, the spacious room occupied by Doctor Ware. The doctor's room, like the others, opened upon the main hall, which terminated pleasantly, at the front, in a big curtained bay with cushioned seats; and, to the rear, in a flight of stairs leading directly down to the dining-room door, and, above, starting upward from the rear, a

lesser flight led up to the mansard floor, unoccupied, since the renewal, used only for storage, and given over to cobwebs in dusky corners, to lurking shadows, and—perhaps, to rats.

From the head of the down-going staircase a hall ran past the side wall of the doctor's apartment, and, opposite this wall, to the rear, two doors opened upon two chambers, large and well lighted, but looking out upon the rear terrace and a small portion of the flower garden. This hall formed, with the main hall of the wing, a shapely L, and it terminated as it began, in a stairway which went down to the side entrance before mentioned and terminated *vis-à-vis* with the side door of the library below.

Upon one of these two rear rooms, situated between the two lesser staircases, Uncle Nat, after some hesitation, fixed his choice. It was not the most spacious, nor yet the most sumptuous, room at his disposal, but he said :

"You see, it has two windows to the east, and actually *no* afternoon sunlight. I can't *abide* the afternoon sunlight ; besides," glancing around to where Brenda stood, somewhat in the rear, "excuse me for saying that I don't like those new-fangled brass bedsteads either, for all their pearl inlay and their summery looks. I like a good old-time four-poster, like this," pointing to the massive old piece of mahogany that had once been prized by Lysander Deering's mother, because of its age and its associations. "I *like* it, and I like to sleep with my head to the north. Always *do* even if I have to turn around a new bed every night. Don't worry because it is not as big or as fine as some of your company rooms. You know, I'm not to be *company*—just one of the family, eh? It's retired, and *that's* worth more than a little to a man who snores as I do. By-the-bye, who sleeps in the next room?"

He had been escorted through the various rooms by Mrs. Merton, and Brenda, for reasons best known to herself, had joined them as they came up the stairs. It was Mrs. Merton who replied,

"The next room is not occupied, and has not been for a long time. The house is so large, there are so many chambers," she added, as if to apologise for his lack of neighbours.

"Oh ! that's just as well. It always sort of worries me to think that I am sleeping and snoring with a poor soul next door wide awake, perhaps, and wishing *me* in Jersey, eh, niece !" with another glance at Brenda. "By the way, where do *these* stairs go?" looking out at the curving descent so near his door.

"They connect with a side hall, and open upon a library door just opposite, and also lead almost directly to an outer door," answered Brenda.

"I see. And is it much used?"

"Hardly ever since the alterations were made. It connects with the dining-room, too."

"Oh ! Does ! Then I may use it—I may use it. Any objections?"

"None whatever."

But Uncle Nat had turned his attention toward the stairway. He walked toward it, humming softly, and stood for a moment looking

down. Then a backward step turned his attention to the rear end of the other portion of the L hall, and he pointed to a door which opened directly across it at the end, and moved toward it. As he stood facing it, the foot of the stairs communicating with the third floor was close at his right hand, so close, indeed, that one might have stepped from that rear doorway straight upon the first stair.

"What's this?" he asked, and he struck his extended finger upon the closed door, "does it open upon a balcony, or the like?"

Mrs. Merton, who had only followed him as far as the turn of the L, uttered a smothered exclamation, and went hastily toward him, Brenda still lingering in the background.

"That is a sleeping room, sir. It is *occupied*—I think—at this moment."

Uncle Nat drew back with ludicrous haste. "*Is* it, indeed? Oh, dear! Is it a guest, Niece Brenda?"

"Only one of our own people, Uncle Nat—Sarita by name, and at present Mrs. Merton's assistant."

"Oh, I see! Yes, yes!" He turned briskly and looked up the narrow flight leading to the mansard attic.

"Do you know I always had a hankering for prowling about an attic, *especially* on a day of storm, rain, and wind! Well," putting one foot upon the lower stair and then withdrawing it, "I won't ask two ladies to escort me through the *attic!*" He turned away and went back to the corner he had chosen for his own. "And so we have only the young men at the front, myself here, and your assistant, madam, in this wing? Room and to spare! I never *did* like a crowded house. A crowded house is an unhealthy house! Well, ladies, I like this apartment; I'll have my traps moved in and take possession—if—I *hope* the bed is well aired?"

Mrs. Merton drew herself erect, and answered somewhat stiffly, "Perfectly so, sir," and turned away, leaving Brenda and Uncle Nat to return as they would to the floor below.

As they were descending the broad front stairs, Brenda ventured a remark,—

"I hope you will not be disappointed in your new quarters," she said; "I trust they will prove satisfactory."

"Oh, they will answer," he said carelessly, and then shooting her a quick glance, "They suit me *perfectly*," he added, and paused to take a quick, keen look up and down the upper hall before the next step downward should shut it from view. A few steps more and the lower hall was visible to the two from end to end, and, being assured of this, but without in the least dropping his *rôle*, Uncle Nat paused and detained his companion by a touch on the arm.

"It occurs to me that you might as well lock the door between my new apartment and that vacant room next door and give *me* the key, or else retain it yourself, that is if the room is ever used for storage or in any manner. It gives one a sort of uneasy feeling to have a door at his bed's head which he has not power to close against intruders,—ghostly, if none other."

"The room is *never* used." Brenda knew her cue.

"Never? Then, perhaps, I might be permitted to put my shower-

bath and my trunk in that room? I should prefer *not* to use the door opening upon the hall, of course."

"I see," she answered. "It shall be arranged."

But she did not see as clearly as she could have wished. She saw nothing, in fact, save that, for some reason, he found these secluded rooms to his taste, and wished to make his privacy doubly secure.

One thing she was free to admit to her own consciousness, as she pondered late, and in her own room, the events of the day. He had not given her a hint of his purpose or plans, and she felt even more sure than at first that she would *not* be admitted to such confidence, but, in spite of this, she somehow felt a growing faith in this man who was playing here, among her friends, a part which gave little indication of the hidden force or power which she was beginning to believe this man possessed; and, for the first time since that awful second tragedy had fallen upon Beechwood, she placed her head upon her pillow with a growing hope and mounting trust that, from out that distant chamber with its "windows to the east," was to come the hand holding the clue which would unravel the mystery of Beechwood. And even as she sank to sleep, she murmured brokenly,—

"I can't—help—but believe—in him."

Only one thought troubled her: From the first she had felt, and in this instance with visible, tangible reasons for the feeling, a confidence in Doctor Ware, both as to his good faith, his friendly interest in her affairs, and his ability. And, over and over that night, she had said to herself, "If *only* I had brought them together, and asked them to *help* each other! I *know* he is *strong* and more than clever!" and these last words did *not* apply to *Detective Murtagh.*

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AN ALLIANCE.

THE next day Uncle Nat was quite interested in seeing the room he had been at such pains to choose arranged for his comfort and convenience. He overlooked in person the bringing up of his various belongings; and was quite surprised, as well as pleased, when Brenda, coming upon the scene just as he was trying to decide *where* "the big long case with the tubes and rubber attachments" was to be put, settled the question by suggesting, quite as a happy thought, that Mrs. Merton open the adjoining room and put Uncle Holly's bath, as well as his heavier luggage, there.

"It was so thoughtful in his niece," he said to Mrs. Merton when Brenda, having accomplished her object, passed on. "It was *very* thoughtful indeed," but then, Brenda, as he "very well remembered," was always thoughtful, "even as a little child."

It was not long after luncheon that Mr. Baird called. He was presented to Uncle Nat, of whom, so he declared, he had more than once heard, and he went in person to assure himself that Brook, who had

complained that morning of languor and weakness, and had excused himself from luncheon, was not seriously worse.

But Brook assured him to the contrary. "It was only," he declared, "that he felt disinclined for exertion, and," with a slow, half smile, "for *conversation;*" then with another half smiling glance toward Bruce, who sat near an open window with the book, which he had been reading when the banker tapped at the half-closed door, open in his hand, "You have met our Uncle Holly, of course; and perhaps you may have discovered already that he is fond of conversation, and quite too polite to resort to monologue."

The banker smiled. He knew, of old, Brook's kindly sarcastic bent, and was used to Bruce's sharper witticisms, and both were accustomed to be their freest and frankest selves before him.

"So you find your guest communicative?" he said, looking from one to the other. "Well, I am not sure that you would not be benefited by the presence of a genial, social spirit among you just now, and elderly bachelors are not always that."

"This one is that," declared Brook. "That and more. Oh!" catching the deprecating look upon the banker's face, "I am not going to disparage the old gentleman. In truth, he seems a good-hearted, well-meaning body enough; a little loquacious to be sure, not so deep as a well, and also a trifle old fogy; but harmless, perfectly *harmless!*"

"I'm glad of *that*, at any rate," declared Mr. Baird, with perfect truth this time, and no under meaning or reservation. "Bruce, is this your opinion also?"

"I have hardly formed an opinion," said Bruce, gravely. "When Mr. Holly made his former visit we did not meet. One thing that I have observed, however, is sufficient to make him welcome to *me.*"

"And that?"

"I can see that his coming, somehow, is a relief to Mrs. Deering, and I can readily see why she should feel it so."

"Yes," replied the banker, "she is unhappily placed, and was peculiarly alone. By the way, Redding called this morning to tell me that the detective is in town, or was yesterday; he has had a long talk with him, and thinks that he understands the case. He says that we may all rest in the assurance that *all* will be done that skill can compass."

Both young men were very attentive now; Bruce Deering's face was suddenly set and stern; Brook flushed and his eyes shone with excitement.

"Ah!" he cried, "that is what I have wished to hear. Are we to know of his methods? Will—will he come *here?*"

"In good time, I suppose," replied the banker. "The man, I believe, has some theories of his own, something that he hopes to develop unaided. Redding tells me that he is not likely to come *here* for several days yet. But he intends to *see* the inmates of Beechwood, one and all, he says, and just *how soon* will depend upon circumstances."

"Ah! h-h!" Brook got up and began to pace the room excitedly; his eyes were unnaturally bright, and his voice quivered with nervous

eagerness. "This is the news I need to make me well again!" he declared. "Waiting is such wearing, weary work. I was never equal to it! Oh, if I could only *help!*"

"You won't help anybody by overdoing, Brook," said Bruce, also rising. "I don't want to preach, but you can put as much courage into patient waiting as into useless action. Besides," bitterly, "*you and I* just now, and until the atmosphere about us *in some way* becomes less hazy, can hardly do *else* than wait! *You* have said it yourself; to be under this roof now, is to be an object of *doubt*, if not of suspicion!"

Brook stopped in his nervous walk, and faced his cousin. "Do you mean"—he caught his breath hard. "Do you mean *me? His son*, *I*, under suspicion! An object of doubt! And he—*my father!*"

"*This* won't *do!*"

The door, but partially closed, for they were in the inner room, had opened silently, while Brook uttered the last words, and it was Doctor Ware who laid a hand upon the young man's shoulder.

"Sit down, Deering," he now added, sternly. "If you value your health, *bodily* and *mental*, you *must* avoid these outbreaks. I am going to give you a draught that will quiet those nerves, and you must lie down and be perfectly quiet."

Brook sighed heavily and let his head drop wearily back among his cushions, but he did not open his lips, and in obedience to a gesture from Doctor Ware, both the banker and Bruce arose silent also.

"You would better go down, too, Mr. Deering," the doctor said to the latter. "You confine yourself too closely here. William is the man we want here now; you may send him up if you will."

. . . . . .

That night, the third night of "Uncle Holly's" stay under Beechwood's roof, Doctor Felix Ware sat in his own room, at a late hour, with his elbows upon his knees and his strong chin supported between two capable white hands; the attitude, and the expression accompanying it, were both indicative of intense thought, and some mental perturbation, and this attitude and look had not changed for a long hour.

The three days of Uncle Holly's stay at Beechwood had given Doctor Felix Ware a problem upon which to whet his keen wits. It had begun he hardly knew how, but every day and hour had increased its weight, until, to-night, he was saying to himself that he could not longer be the keeper of what he felt to be another's secret.

Arrived at this point, he could see two courses open to him, and it was a decision that he had been labouring over for the last hour.

"I'll do it!" he said finally, and started to find he had spoken aloud. "I'll *do* it!—but how?"

The night was cool, but not cold, and a late moon was gleaming through his curtains as they were stirred by the breeze coming in through the partly opened window.

"How, indeed?" he repeated, and went to the window, pushed the sash higher, and looked out.

It was very still down there in the rose garden, very dim and shadowy; and as his gaze fell upon a rustic seat just below him, and

in the shade of some tall cinnamon rose-bushes, he almost started at the shape it took at first glance. He had extinguished his light before opening the window, and drawing back the curtain, he now leaned farther out, and looked long and keenly; could it be possible? It *looked* as if a shape, a *woman's* shape, was seated upon the rustic bench beside the rose-bush.

It was a south window, and the place was not far from the spot where, not long before, Brenda had seen two dim figures meet and vanish as one; but *this* time the figure, if such it was, would have been invisible to Brenda, her room being in the newer portion of the dwelling, and her windows, though looking southward, were shut off from this view, as before stated, by that jutting wing in which the rooms of the doctor, the two cousins, and Uncle Holly were located.

Looking now with all his eyes, he fancied that he saw a movement where the figure seemed to be, and, a moment later, that midnight horror, the voice of a howling cat, broke the stillness, and for a little time the air was filled with the unearthly sounds, then all was still where the shadow yet rested. Only for a moment, however, then the sounds began again, seeming to be yet nearer, and a voice, close beside him, startled him with a loud cry. "Scat!" something flew past his head, whizzing as it cleft the air, and striking the ground with an audible thud.

Doctor Felix turned his head quickly, and there in a window just beyond, was another head white nightcapped, in spite of the thick, white hair, and with the arm which had just hurled the missel still outstretched.

And *now*, there was an unmistakable movement near the rose thicket, and a figure glided away from the rustic bench, darted around the tall bush, and was out of sight.

"Good-evening," said the serene voice of Uncle Holly, "do you think I *hit* that cat?" He was leaning far out from his casement, and the hand which rested half-on-half over the window ledge, held drooping from between the fingers the companion to the stout shoe he had carefully aimed so that it might fall in the pathway critically near the figure upon the bench.

The darkness hid the smile upon the doctor's face, a smile called forth by the exceeding readiness—which he admired,—of the man who, even as he, must have fancied himself sole witness to the midnight flitting. His answer came with equal readiness:

"You must, at least, have startled the—*cat*. It was well aimed—to miss."

Both had spoken in tones so low as to be barely audible across the intervening space, which contained a few feet of wall belonging to their respective chambers, and the end of the lower half of the L, holding in its ten feet of width a window like their own.

"I *hate* cats!" came next from Uncle Holly's window; "and I *won't* be annoyed by them, if I can silence them in any way." He was speaking now in a somewhat louder tone, and with evident disregard of listeners. "I have been annoyed by cats—oh, I dare say more than any man alive." He leaned far out, and seemed trying to pierce the darkness in search of a lingering feline. But the man at

the other window was no more the man to be baffled, or to relinquish a desired opportunity once it came in his way, than was the quondam Uncle Holly himself. He saw that the outward movement was but a preparation for a quick withdrawal, and, while he was listening to the diatribe on cats, he was saying to himself, "*Now* is my time," and, leaning out like his neighbour, only with his body inclined toward him, instead of straight outward, he began quickly, the moment the other had uttered his last word:

"Mr.—I will *say* Holly, will you give me a few words? Now, to-night? Believe me it will be *best*, I verily believe for all under this roof, if you and I understand each other better. Will you not open your door and let me come to you? or—*my* room is open to you!"

There was not a moment of waiting. "Uncle Holly" was prompt with his answer.

"And—suppose I refuse such a singular request?"

"Then," replied Felix Ware with that straightforward dignity which had made itself felt and understood through thicker skins and skulls than Uncle Holly's, "if you refuse, then you will find that I am too much a friend to Beechwood and its mistress to do aught but regret that my *help*, if it should chance to be needed, was not accepted by one who, I am sure, is here in *her* service, even as I am."

And now there was a moment of silence, then—

"Doctor,"—the words just audible—"have you a medicine case with you?"

"Certainly," in the same guarded accents; and this time Doctor Felix felt a shade of surprise. "He's a cool one!" he mentally added.

"Because," in a doleful half whisper, "my rheumatism is *always* bad on a night like this. If I rap on your wall *quite softly*, will you come out, *with your case*, and come, quietly, not to arouse the sleepers, to my door? Don't knock, *enter*."

With the last word "Uncle Holly" drew back, quickly, and his window closed with a distinctly audible sound. In a moment the other window closed, also very softly, and the doctor drew his curtains and struck a light.

The tap upon the wall came soon, and soft, and softer yet was the doctor's step, as, case in hand, he entered the corner room.

Uncle Holly closed and secured the door when he had entered, and then turned to his importunate guest with a broad smile upon his disguised but amiable countenance,

"Well, doctor," he began, "what is it? We can't remain closeted here too long; so don't let's waste time; explain yourself."

The two men stood face to face, and the lamp, burning its brightest on the reading-table near them, threw its rays over each, as they eyed one another intently.

The doctor smiled, and set down his case.

"I'm glad to be given this opportunity," he answered frankly. "The facts are simply these. I am here under peculiar circumstances, as medical adviser, solicited, and secured, first, by the master of the house, now dead, and, later, asked by this master's widow to remain in attendance upon the young man of whom we both know. I was the first to discover the presence of poison in the system of the deceased

Mr. Deering;—I have been trusted by his widow. I had grown to know him very well, and to feel strongly drawn to him, and when this horrible fact forced itself upon my knowledge, my whole soul cried out against the poisoner, and I was ready to place myself, my strength or knowledge, medical or other, at her command. I have watched every feature of this affair closely, with keenest interest, and much anxiety, in behalf of a woman who is, I fully believe, noble, pure, and true, and who is bravely bearing, almost alone, a fearful load of grief and responsibility. Perhaps I have watched her too keenly; God knows it has been an honest and most respectful espionage! But knowing much, and reasoning upon what I *knew*, it has not been difficult for me to guess at your identity. It was like the mistress of Beechwood to boldly introduce *a detective* into her household; I knew she *would* do it,—from the *first*."

"*Very* good!" Uncle Holly pulled a big lounging chair forward with a quick jerk, crossed the room and pulled another close beside it, and, placing himself before one, indicated the other with a wave of his hand.

"There's no need of wasting words between *us*, Doctor Felix Ware," he said, sinking into his seat, as the doctor placed himself in the other. "*I* know a good many people who don't know *me*, and, in your case, I sha'n't ask for a 'recommend.' Do you remember one Brash Weeks of city hospital fame?"

The doctor started—but before he could reply:

"Well," went on the other, "when Weeks went into the hospital I was on tenter hooks. I knew that our success now rested upon, or in, the hands of those who attended him; the fellow was bound to die, and so much depended upon what he might *say!* I never saw you before, and I've never seen you since, until now, but I don't forget a face, or a name. When I went to the boss, doctor, and told him how critical the issue was, and begged, yes, actually *begged*, to be allowed to assist in the ward where Weeks lay, he just smiled, and said, 'Every *honest* man, my friend, hopes to hear that Brash Weeks has lived just long enough to tell the truth. I'm so anxious, *myself*, that I've put a young man in charge in that ward, *solely* for the *purpose* of drawing out Weeks. He's gentle and strong, keen and magnetic. I've known him for years, and I'd *trust* him with a delicate job like this in preference to half your old detectives. If Felix Ware can't handle your man, he will die and take his secret with him.' I don't need to tell *you* how it came out. 'Ware won't see you,' says the doctor, when I asked to meet you. And when I asked why such a man was not one of us, putting his talent to good use, he laughed and said, 'There are two good reasons why you can't make Ware into a detective. One is that he is already a doctor—a regularly licensed sawbones. The other—well—he's got money enough to live on, and some to spare.'" He leaned toward his *vis-à-vis*, and dropping his chin upon one hand, the elbow resting upon his knee, he added, "And now, doctor, let me have the object of your visit to-night."

"Being one at the meeting upon the occasion of, and following after the reading of the will, and hearing the consultation at that time, I, of course, knew that a detective would soon be among us, in some way,

known or unknown. As I have already said, I have been deeply interested—"

Quick as a flash came the two words, "*Have* been?"

The doctor's face never lost its steadfast earnestness, and his eyes met those other keen orbs full and unwavering.

"I stand corrected. I *am* interested, and more than interested, from the moment when I discovered, with such horror as I cannot picture to you, that Mr. Deering—whom I believed to be—and who *was*, twenty-four hours earlier—past all danger, and requiring only such tender, thoughtful care as I *knew* he was *sure* of—that he lay before me—*dead*—and by the hand of an enemy!"

"Doctor!"

Something in the tone in which the single word was spoken startled the speaker—he stopped short, his eye keenly alert.

"Doctor, I have not heard the word spoken or hinted at, but is it possible that *nobody* thought of—suicide?"

"*Sir!* I will call you Holly everywhere but here. *You* do not believe *that* for one moment. And I—I was a stranger to this man two months ago, for I only met him a few days before he set out for his home; but I have seen into his very heart since then, I verily believe; and there was not in his nature, and never had been, or could be, one atom of that strange mixture of cowardice and reckless desperate daring which *must* exist in the composition of the suicide! I am a student of, and, in some degree, a *believer* in the science—for it *is* a science—of physiognomy, or, if you like, phrenology. Lysander Deering *could* not have thrown the gift of life back into the hand of the All Powerful Giver of lives! Such men as he come into the world with the divine mark upon them; with veneration, spirituality, and faith inborn. He might suffer, he might even cry out, as Job did, but he *could* not doubt, and doubt and self-murder go hand in hand. Lysander Deering was a Christian!"

"And yet—he was, you say—murdered."

"Yes."

The word fell from Felix Ware's lips like the final word, with the dropping of the voice which indicates a subject closed. And Ferriss Murtagh through half-shut lids watched him with interest and secret self-congratulation, while he thought—"He won't even discuss the subject further, much less *argue* it. That's what his '*yes*' means. And he's right too." Aloud he said, sitting erect in his chair and putting the tips of his fingers together in a fashion well known to his chief and his comrades as indicating inward gratification and growing interest,—"I believe you are right regarding the dead man," he said, "but before we go further into that, tell me what did I or anyone else do to lead *you*, the one utter stranger in this house, to doubt the 'identity' of Mr. Nathan Holly?"

For the first time since the beginning of their interview, Doctor Felix smiled as he said—

"Then you admit the reasonableness of my doubt?"

"I admitted *that* when I opened my door to you. In fact, Doctor Ware," and here he held out his hand, "I welcome the doubter.

Such an assistant as you might be, if you chose, would aid me here immensely, and, I believe, shorten the work by half!"

Felix Ware came quickly to his feet, and the other involuntarily followed his example. As he grasped the still extended hand, Ware said, "Giving this case my closest thought and study from the first, you can hardly be surprised at my discovery. I knew a detective *must* come among us soon, and was on the alert to see what new face would appear, though, to be frank, I never anticipated anything quite so bold as this reality, nor so promising! I was prepared, you see, to view with suspicion any new face; but have no fear, there has been no flaw in your disguise, and even I must have remained in doubt and hesitation for some time yet, but for two circumstances—"

"What were they?" broke in Murtagh.

"The *first*, I must confess, strengthened my suspicion, and made me study you closely. It was a very slight oversight on your part, and I made sure that it should not arouse another to suspicion, I was taking my hat from the rack in the upper hall, when, in removing it, I carelessly displaced the linen duster which you carried upon your arm at the time of your arrival. In hanging it up again, properly, by the collar, my eye caught a city *trade mark*, but the tag, attached by most of our enterprising retail dealers, read, Messrs. W. & H., *Chicago*."

"Pests!" The detective struck his hand against his thigh. "*Was* I so *stupid?*"

"I assure you it was your *only* oversight; and I watched you closely. I also removed the tag, as you will observe, when you examine the garment."

"*Thank* you! You see how much I need an assistant! But the other item? that which must have convinced you?"

"I have already said that I am a pretty close student of the human face and—*hand*."

"Eh?" With a visible start, "Ah—go on."

"Yesterday, while sitting next you—after the ladies had left us at the table, you remember, perhaps—"

"That you left your place and came and sat beside *me?* to avoid the reflected sunlight, you *said*."

"Quite so. Well, I wanted to study your hand. I am a physician, remember, and a *surgeon*, and I soon decided that the hand which held that cup of coffee, and handled those excellent cigarettes, was *younger than the head* that drank the one and smoked the other. The flesh, muscles, tissues, were not sixty-seven years old, not even *forty*."

The detective's eyes were twinkling with amusement and admiration of the doctor's shrewdness.

"Doctor," he ejaculated, "the schools may have made you a *doctor*, but you were *born a detective;* shake *again*. I feel as if success was already knocking at the door! May I say, *our door?*"

"Will you?"

"Gladly; and put all my trumps down before you." He glanced swiftly about the room, and getting up, went to the window. "Draw your chair farther from that door, my friend," he said, coming back and moving his own seat across the room, and quite near the outer

wall. "We can't go into details to-night, but will manage to get a chance to talk *to-morrow* in some way."

"How would a drive serve, *tête-à-tête?*"

"The very thing! That is—"

"Oh! I drive when I like. I don't *walk* much in the village, you see, because it seems best to avoid meeting the townspeople; you know how easily they get to know you? I used to drive with Mr. Deering, and his horse has been put at my disposal."

"Excellent. We will reserve our plans then until to-morrow. Doctor, I'm blessing that—*cat.*"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE "CAT."

"THAT cat!—oh—yes."

"Apropos of that now! come,—to give you a proof of my full confidence in you—I will tell you, right here, about that—cat."

"Pardon me! one moment, please; there is more that *I* ought to say; must say, in fact. *Your* position here is clearly defined, you are here to search and to find out—"

"If I *can!*"

"If you can—of course. On the other hand, *I* am here as guest and physician; I say *guest*, because I might, easily, have been treated with all due courtesy *as a physician*, and yet have remained outside that intangible but distinctly felt line, which is drawn, often, and rightly, about the welcome guest. I have been made to feel, so strongly, that I am honoured as guest as well as physician, that I cannot forget, as I may seem to have done to-night, my duty to my hostess and employer. Having decided that you were what your are, and being so wishful to serve my hostess, by trying to aid you, I could see no other way open but to let you know that I was aware of the truth concerning your position in this house. Having found you out, I felt that I owed it to you to tell you so. And now—before we seal any further compact—my hostess must know what I have done to-night, and must decide, if she will permit me, to serve her in this new capacity, as well as in the old."

The sham Uncle Holly sat before him with a face suddenly grave, and so keen in its intentness that, after a moment of silence, the doctor added:

"You see, of course, how different is your position and mine. I *cannot* put my hand further into this matter, so near and personal to Mrs. Deering, without first receiving her consent."

"And you think she *will* consent?" The face of the detective was still speculative.

"I hope she will. I believe she trusts me."

"If she does not, she will!" declared the other with sudden emphasis. "Doctor—this stops us short. *I* believe in you! *I* want you! To-morrow I will see—the lady. I think my first drive must be with

her, you and I must talk later, and as best we can. Pshaw!" with a sudden change from grave to gay. "And I wanted to talk with you to-night about—those cats."

"Oh!" ejaculated Ware, smiling in sympathy, "the 'cat' has grown into the *plural?*"

"The cat that roams at uncanny hours is apt to," rejoined the detective dryly. And then suddenly he dropped back into his well-studied character, and was Uncle Holly, and no other, during the few remaining moments of their interview.

The next day a slip of paper, pressed into her palm as they exchanged a morning greeting, told Brenda that already there was need for a "few words apart," and so, while the sun was still "riding the east," Brenda and Uncle Holly drove away from Beechwood, and out upon the smooth, north road.

In few words, and ignoring altogether the episode of the garden, and the "cats," Murtagh told her how he had conversed with Doctor Ware, each at his own window, and the result of the conversation. And when all was told, he added:

"Before you express yourself upon this matter, Mrs. Deering, allow me to say, that, for myself, nothing could please me better than to take this young man, whose ability and good faith are beyond question, into my entire confidence. He can give me the very help I need, and, as for him, it is his strong and earnest desire to be permitted to aid me, and, through me, *yourself*."

Through the cloud of gauzy black, which half-concealed her face, he could see the rich colour rise; and her words were slow in coming.

"I cannot pretend," she began at last, speaking as if watching her words and holding them in check, "and I will not try to pretend, that I do not appreciate and realise the help Doctor Ware could be to—to—you. I dare not refuse such aid and strength as he can bring to—to the work. But—I must ask you to continue as you began; you know—you were to employ such aid as you would, but all communications with me—must come through you. Between Doctor Ware and myself let nothing be changed—you understand?"

"Entirely," replied the detective, and, to himself, he added: "I'm blessed if I *do* all the same! Wonder if she *quite* understands *herself?*"

One thing, at least, Brenda Deering perfectly understood when she put her head down upon her pillow that night, and that was the comfort of a wish realised, and a sense of security and trust, surpassing anything she may have felt when Murtagh's aid and skill were secured to her beyond a doubt.

"At least," she murmured with a long sigh, not altogether a sigh of anxiety, "at least he will see things as they *are!* *He* may, *he* WILL understand."

* * * * * * * * *

On the following morning, Brook Deering appeared at the breakfast table, leaning upon his cousin's arm; and, to the surprise of all, announced his intention to drive into town that morning to visit the bank, and to call upon Mr. Baird.

He was looking better, "more like the Brook of old," said those who

had known him—especially Mrs. Merton and the maids; and he declared himself quite able to begin to be more active. He was a little weak, of course, but more exercise and out-of-door life would remedy that, he said.

"I shall not try to drive, of course; I am to be my cousin's passenger;" this he said in answer to some remonstrances and suggestions from "Uncle Holly," who declared his belief in a succession of baths, with "absolute rest" between, as a cure for such pale faces and unsteady nerves as were displayed by the patient.

Brook's face flushed redly enough, and there was a displeased look in the eyes he turned upon the benign and solicitous old gentleman; but his words, when at last they were uttered, were slow and languid, and perfectly amiable.

"I fancy I'm stronger than I look; and I fear there's been too much *rest* already—for me. If I break down, I'll try your plan, however," and he smiled amiably upon Uncle Holly as he left the room, with Bruce still in attendance.

As the door closed behind them, the eyes of Uncle Holly and Doctor Felix met for one instant, and as they left the breakfast-room the doctor said:

"Unless I have a duty at hand, I like a smoke after breakfast, and I like it in such weather out of doors. Do you care to join me, Mr. Holly?"

At first Mr. Holly seemed about to decline; but he appeared to consider, and, finally, after fussily assuring himself that his cigarette case was at hand, he decided to accept.

When they were out upon the eastern terrace, with the line of trees, bordering the edge, casting a pleasant shade along the footway, and the green and flower-studded bank sloping sharply down to the lawn and tennis ground below, Uncle Holly took a long look around him, and up and down, as he said:

"One can walk here by day, and converse, without much danger of eavesdroppers approaching too near: I always try to take the fewest risks possible—but we *can* talk here. Did you expect to get a sign from me last night; or after my drive with Mrs. D——?" Murtagh used initials, when it was possible to distinguish his personages thus.

"I hoped for, but can hardly say that I expected it," replied the doctor. "There was too much stir last night; the young man was restless; we will try for it to-night."

"We couldn't well be overheard if we were reasonably cautious; but we can't risk being suspected. To arouse suspicion hampers one horribly! For instance, those—cats."

"Ah!—the cats?"

"Yes, we may as well begin with them. You see it was not their first rendezvous, nor the *second*; nearly a week ago Mrs. Deering, chancing to be restless, and sitting late at her open window, with but half-closed curtains, saw a figure outside lurking about in the rose garden; she wisely informed me of this before I entered the house, and I at once set a watch upon the garden."

"Ah!"

"My lad, for it is a lad, small and shrewd, tells me that they met

on the second night after Mrs. D——'s discovery ; the first night of his watch, in fact ; and so I set a trap for them."

"Ah ! a trap ?"

"Precisely, and baited it with one of my shoes. You see I had discovered that there were *two*—'cats'—and that one was under this roof, while the other came from—town."

"Is it possible ?" The doctor's face darkened.

"Don't jump at conclusions, my friend ; you think, I'll wager, that the woman, or what looked like a woman, came from this house ?"

"And—am I wrong ?" breathlessly.

"Yes. The *man* comes from the house, and waits, prowling cautiously from shelter to shelter, until the other appears."

"And that other ?"

"*Is* a woman, I believe."

"And who—" The doctor stopped short. "Please explain in your own way," he said grimly ; "I will not interrupt again."

"Oh, I don't mind the interruption. But to get on ;" he stopped to poke at a flower with his cane. "The *man*, we have yet to identify,—the woman, my boy followed until she lost herself—*where* do you think ?"

"Don't ask *me !*"

"Well, it was useless ; she vanished at *the corner of St. Mark's Church.*"

"Not the church opposite the *bank ?*"

"The very same. Now, I said to myself, let's try and identify the lady. Then I set my lad, who is an accomplished mimic, to practising the cat-calls, away out in the woods. He does it well, don't you think ?"

"Yes ; but go on !"

"Well, you were witness of the success of it. To-night they will know themselves discovered ; at least, will fear it ; and will give up *this* manner of seeing each other. Then they will form some new plan ; don't you think so ?"

"I think that you suspect, if you do not *know*, who these two people are."

"Well—you are right. I do *suspect ;* nothing more just yet. But if I am *right*, the woman will bring us the proof."

"How ?"

"By coming in person, and with all boldness, to Beechwood."

The doctor's face was expressive of silent inquiry, and Murtagh went on :

"I mean to make my position quite clear to you, Doctor Ware ; and to do this I must place before you some notes that I have made from time to time concerning this case ; but we cannot flaunt documents here, nor yet in our drives, and this is why I am compelled, much as I object to holding any manner of interviews in this house that are not strictly in character, to admit you to my room to-night ; I shall take all precautions, and you must do likewise. In the meantime, before you become in any manner or degree prejudiced or suspicious, I want to hear your impressions ; or, if you have such, your opinion, upon

this case. You have been, you tell me, deeply interested ; and you discard—to begin with—the theory of suicide ?"

"I discard it utterly. The man was *poisoned !*"

"And—you were his physician—one of them—could an *accident* have been possible ?"

"*No !* There was no poisonous drug of any sort in or about the sick room ; I am *sure* of that ! Liscom will say the same. It was a crime premeditated."

"Have you the faintest reason to doubt or suspect any one ?"

The doctor started, and, for a moment, seemed to hesitate. Then he answered slowly, "No—none whatever."

They had reached, after taking several turns, a point upon the terrace where stood a double *tête*, of twisted wood, formed in the fashion known as the S, and so shaped that the two people occupying it would face each other, and, of course, opposite points of the compass ; above, a huge maple afforded shade, and all about was the open lawn, except for the grassy slope at one side, and a circular flower-bed upon the other, and quite near.

"Let us sit here," said the detective. "This is well adapted to our purpose."

When they were seated, he leaned forward and plucked two or three savoury spice pinks from the bed beside them, and holding them and fingering them from time to time, as if delivering a discourse upon botany to an interested listener, he began anew.

"Doctor Ware, I am going to ask you to do a considerable piece of work before you join me to-night—something which, I hope, will be a real help to me, to *both* of us, in our search."

"And what is that ?"

"You believe in phrenology ?"

"Yes ; in a measure."

"Did you ever make a study of heads ?"

"Yes," smiling.

"Could you, without an actual fingering of the head, say from casual observations made at table, or in the drawing-room, could you thus give an outline of the traits, the characters of this family ? That is—I mean of the two ladies, the cousins, and, perhaps, *one* more ?"

"I could give a brief statement of what I *believe* to be their traits, and tendencies—yes ; it would, doubtless, be based upon my knowledge and experience as a physician, as well as upon phrenological data. Is that what you want ? They would stand for opinions—not facts—of course."

"Of course. The truth is," went on Murtagh, tearing away a rosy petal and holding it up to view, "I have evolved a theory which would amaze you if I were to make it known to you now. It's a very daring theory indeed ; and it lacks, at present, I must confess, some *very* important points ; as—for instance—*motive*. Just now I am trying to find some corroborative facts to fit into my theory, and what you will write for me will strengthen said theory, or it will weaken it materially—kill it almost !"

"You make me feel my responsibility."

"Oh! I don't depend upon you *alone!* I look to our two—cats—to help confirm or tear down my theory."

"May I ask how?"

"As I have said, they will, if I am on the right track, make a new effort to meet; and I think I know what they will do."

"And that—"

"If I am right, the woman will come *to the house.*" He looked at his companion's puzzled face for a moment, and then, as if by some sudden impulse, he asked:

"Doctor, how much do you know concerning Mr. Bruce Deering and the Matchin matter?"

"How much? Why—I suppose I know the outlines of the case. That young Deering was and is accused of the murder. Mr. Lysander Deering told me the story, and Mrs. Deering has also spoken of it to me."

"And Mr. Deering—how did he express himself—as to belief?"

"He? Oh! *his* faith in his nephew was as granite."

"And she?"

"Why—I don't think she expressed herself in *words;* but her whole tone and manner has implied belief in him, as a matter of course."

"And you?—have you given the case much thought?"

"N—no; I confess that I have rather refrained from doing so. I have treated it as the skeleton in my patron's closet; not meant for my eyes."

"I am sorry! I wish you had studied that case, and had formed an opinion, or, at least, a guess."

"May I ask why? when this later case comes so much nearer to us just now."

"*Does* it, indeed? My dear doctor, if my little theory does not break down under the two or three tests we are about to give it, we shall find ourselves delving, *first of all*, into the case of the *Pomfret Bank Murder.*"

"What! Do *you* connect Bruce Deering—with this later crime?"

"*No!* But I connect this later crime with the first, and I believe that we shall never find the clue to Lysander Deering's murder until we have solved the Matchin mystery! I believe they are two bloody acts of *the same drama;* and that the secret behind them has not even been guessed at. But there! no more upon this topic until I have seen your characterisation, your phrenological chart."

"By the way, who is the 'one other' in your list?"

"Oh, yes, the other one is—I hope you know her well enough—the other is the woman they call *Sarita.*"

The drive, by which carriages arrived at the door of Beechwood, was approached by two gates, one at the south end of the grounds proper, and the other at the north or opposite corner. It formed, at the front, a distended half circle, by which a guest could enter at the south gate from Pomfret, alight, half-way, upon the great front portico, and retire by the north gate, thus completing the half circle; while the family vehicles, or those of visitors who tarried long, might, if they chose, entering by these same north or south gates, swerve aside from the half moon as they neared the respective corners at the south and

north fronts, where a lesser, but equally well-gravelled, drive, curving out from the half circle, swept under a *porte-cochère* on the south side, and past an extended piazza on the north, and so from thence stableward.

When the two men arose from their seats beneath the big maple tree, they took a final promenade across the terrace, and, at the detective's suggestion, turned to re-enter the house by the south or side door, which opened so directly upon the library.

"I'm going to affect this especial door," said Murtagh, as they approached it, "and the stairway also. It will soon come to be looked upon as one of 'Uncle Holly's' whims, at least I hope so. *Ah—h!*"

They had almost reached the steps at the side entrance, and as he uttered the syllable quickly, and stopped short, ostensibly to examine the blossoms of an early wistaria, but really to cast a sharp side glance at a village cart which had just entered the drive through the south gate; the doctor looked, too, but more openly.

It was a momentary glance; then his companion said under his breath: "*Let's get in!*" and turned toward the steps, up which he was dutifully assisted by the doctor's ready hand.

As they crossed the threshold, the detective gave his companion's arm a quick, nervous pressure.

"It has *come!*" he whispered, and hastened up the little curving stairs, closely followed by Doctor Felix.

At the top Murtagh glanced quickly about him, and then added, in the same quick almost inaudible whisper, from which the sibilant carrying quality had been, by long practice, eliminated:

"This is better than I hoped! Do you know that young woman in the cart?"

"No."

"That is our—our *cat!*"

"*Eh!*" Doctor Felix fairly caught his breath.

"Our *shadow*, then—*one* of them!"

Doctor Felix looked almost incredulous. And the detective, seized by some new thought, again caught his arm.

"I want you to see her! to *know* her, if possible. You must go below, and if she calls for the ladies, try to manage it."

The doctor's head went suddenly erect, then remembering that he was this man's assistant, self-proffered, he breathed in his ear:

"Mrs. Deering is in the library; I saw her. Let's both go down. Who is she?"

"Miss—Wardell. Go on, then, quick and quiet!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CRUMBS.

THE two men entered the library by the side door, and Doctor Ware smiled, and "Uncle Holly" gave utterance to a suppressed chuckle when he saw Mrs. Deering sitting at the big library table, writing busily.

She glanced up as they entered, and then went on with her work, while the doctor busied himself before one of the bookcases, and Uncle Holly, after a careless glance about him, sauntered toward the big table.

"May I write just a few words here, Niece Brenda?" he queried cheerfully, and Brenda nodded, said "Certainly," and went on with her writing.

The doctor had found himself a book, and Uncle Holly, seated at the end of the table farthest from the lady, wrote with painstaking slowness one or two short sentences, which he handed across to the doctor.

"Those two firms, doctor," he said amiably, "are both to be relied upon, if you choose to give them a trial."

As the card passed from hand to hand the two exchanged significant glances, and, in another instant, the door opened and the housemaid appeared.

"Miss Wardell," she said to her mistress, "is in the reception-room."

The lady looked up quickly; clearly she had neither heard nor seen the village cart.

"I will come at once," she said, then added a few swiftly written words to the letter under her hand.

A moment later, as she crossed the library in the direction of the reception-room, just beyond, the hand of "Uncle Holly" made a sudden movement, becoming as suddenly inactive again; and Doctor Ware, the next instant, uttered a quick exclamation, sprang forward, and, catching something from the floor just behind the lady, said:

"Pardon, did you let this fall?" at the same time putting a slip of paper in her hand.

She started, but took the paper, and, glancing at it, turned her eyes for just a second toward Uncle Holly, who was watching her with mild inquiry.

"Thanks!" she murmured, as she crumpled the note in her hand. "'Tis only a scrap—of no consequence," but as she passed out she thrust the "scrap" into her pocket, as the doctor closed the door behind her.

The bit of paper so deftly tossed down by the detective, as he crossed the room, contained these words:

"*I want to know Miss Wardell's errand.*"

The reception-room opened directly from the vestibule, and did not connect with any other room; the only door, beside the outer one, connecting it with the wide hall. Between this room and the library, was the pleasant home-like place called the breakfast or morning-room, and there was, between the two, a door, usually locked on the library side, and screened on the other by a heavy curtain.

A moment after Brenda had passed from the library, this door was lightly shaken, and Doctor Ware, sitting near, sprang toward it, and, slipping back the bolt, opened it wide. Brenda Deering stood beneath the half-parted curtains, and her face was very grave. She cast a quick glance behind her and then swept up the table where the detective still sat.

"There is no one near," she said in low, clear tones, "and I *must*, this once, disregard your rules! Tell me, is this thing *important?*"

"*It is!*" The detective's tones were incisive, and his face was as grave as her own.

"Then," she said, "I shall leave this door," with a glance toward it, "*open*, and the *portière* closed. And I shall receive the lady in the next room. I will not allow my scruples, as a hostess, to interfere with things necessary."

"Madam," the detective was on his feet, and close beside her, "consider that you are a wife first,—a hostess afterward!"

She lifted her head with a sudden stately motion, and her eyes, as they met his, were full of a stern resolve.

"Thank you!" she murmured. "You shall not need to recall me to my first duty—again!"

She set the door wide open, pushed an easy-chair against it, and swept aside the curtain, revealing to them, for one instant, the little room with a dainty carved and cushioned seat, so arranged that its back was towards the curtained doorway; and as the drapery swung to, they saw her move towards this. Instantly Murtagh placed himself in the easy-chair against the door; and before he could utter the whisper that was upon his lips, they heard a door open, and a clear, low-pitched voice said:

"Mrs. Deering, I really beg you to pardon this almost intrusion at this hour! I have consented to come on behalf of my housekeeper, Mrs. Fram; but, as I *am* here, will you not permit me to say how much I have felt for you in your sorrow and loss. You know—" here there was a momentary break in the low voice, "*I* have known what it is to sit alone in a house of mourning! And you—I am glad to know that *you* are *not* quite alone!"

The answer, brief but courteous, was almost inaudible; then the low clear voice went on.

"My errand is really very petty, but it seems I am to blame for the loss of one of Mrs. Fram's choicest recipes; a confection which she concocts only upon lofty occasions, and for which she paid some renowned male cook a 'sound sum,' as she says."

"Ah?" came softly from Mrs. Deering, with an inquiring inflection.

"You see," went on the visitor, "some time ago,—during your absence, in fact,—Mrs. Fram—that woman really *does* impose upon me shamefully, but you know how reliable she is, and how long she has been at her post—"

"Yes—a long time indeed."

"Ah, yes! Ever since poor mamma's death, and she almost *rules* me! One day she chanced to hear me speak of driving out upon the north road, and, forthwith, she remembered that Mrs. Merton had asked for a recipe for some sort of meat jelly which, they both agreed, would be the very thing for your dear invalid, and she asked, or *commanded*, me to 'just drop it at your gate.' I did so; you were, as I have said, in New York; and Mrs. Merton was also from home. Madam Sarita came to the door, being, I believe, in charge, and I left the precious formula in her hands and forgot all about it. *Now*

poor Mrs. Fram misses her valuable formula, which, it appears, is too complicated to be trusted, like most of her recipes, to her memory. In looking for it she finds the copy of the meat jelly intended, long ago, for Mrs. Merton, and jumps to the conclusion that she has sent the wrong document, by some blunder; so, to ease her troubled mind, I volunteered to drive this way and see if Mrs. Merton has still the precious recipe."

"Then you will wish to see Mrs. Merton?"

The listeners heard the quietly spoken words, and a movement which, they knew, meant that Mrs. Deering had promptly touched the bell to summon the housekeeper. Then a moment passed in which Miss Wardell murmured some regrets that she had been "almost constrained" to come upon "such an errand at such a time;" and added a second half-laughing comment upon the anxiety and "too great exigence" of the housekeeper; and Mrs. Deering answered by a polite word or two; while, on the other side of the curtain, the detective sat with a face of eager gravity, and a gleam of excitement in his eyes, which caused the doctor to wonder and to smile a little. The interview seemed sufficiently tame to him.

The dialogue ran on, Miss Wardell talking in a sympathetically subdued voice, inquiring after Miss Rodney, but declining to have her called, and asking if it were true that Mr. Brook Deering was quite ill, as had been rumoured; and Mrs. Deering replying, as briefly as possible, and allowing her guest to lead the talk whither she would. And then Mrs. Merton, in a snowy apron and fresh cap, came in.

Before Miss Wardell could open her lips, Mrs. Deering had put the question to her housekeeper, and received a prompt reply.

Mrs. Merton remembered *perfectly* having asked Mrs. Fram for the recipe for the mutton jelly; but she was *sure* she had never yet received it; and then she turned to Ora Wardell, adding:

"Perhaps, Miss Wardell, you remember when it was. I had called in to see Mrs. Fram, who was ailing somewhat, and you came in to ask after her, and to learn when she would be ready to come back." For Mrs. Fram, when not fit for duty, or when making a holiday, retired always to her sister's house in South Pomfret—where Mrs. Merton was also well known and very welcome.

It was at this point in the interview that the doctor was amazed to see Murtagh's face relax into an approving smile, and his hands enact pantomimic applause.

Miss Wardell's answer, too, seemed to please him, though she only said, in a somewhat indifferent tone, "Very likely; although I hardly recall it." Then, turning to Mrs. Deering, "Do you think we might ask Madam Sarita? She *may* have overlooked it."

"Mrs Merton," said Mrs. Deering, "please send Sarita to us, or, better, bring her, but say nothing about the lost paper."

And now came Sarita, who entered wondering, listened with growing comprehension, and for a moment seemed struggling with a treacherous memory; then she broke forth volubly.

Yes! She recalled it *all!* Miss Wardell had said only the *truth;* Miss Wardell had put that paper, that RECIPE, into *her* very *own hand!* and *she! what did* she do with that paper? She meant, *so surely*, to

give it *at once* to Mrs Merton; at the *first moment*, etc., etc.; and then she racked her brains, and sounded her memory anew, with the result, after a time, of recalling the facts that on that especial day she had been unusually annoyed and tired, she had been almost alone that day, and she had much to do, being in consequence wearied, "and when so weary! madam knows," she affirmed, "I am oh *so* foolishly forgetful!" She had hurt her hand that day, and had been annoyed by an old man who came with a sad story of want and a plea for a place for his nephew, or himself, thereby harrowing her already much tired soul anew. "Ah!" she concluded, "I recall it! I did not *lose* it, I am *sure!* I said, 'I will put it carefully where it may not be lost, until Mrs. Merton comes once more,' and—*yes*, I am almost *sure!* I *must* have laid it away among my boxes, somewhere; and then all the strange things coming so soon after—the sickness, the trouble—*!*" she looked appealingly from one to the other.

"Do you mean," said Mrs. Merton judicially, "that you think you may be able to find it, yet?"

"Yes—*yes!* If I may be permitted to search! If the young lady will have patience—"

Sarita wheeled about in haste, but Mrs. Deering stopped her with a peremptory gesture.

"If you think you can find it, go at once and look, but don't take up too much of Miss Wardell's time." She motioned her away and looked at her watch. "Mrs. Merton, the dinner *menu* must be looked over, and I think we can excuse you here since the paper, if found, will not be your recipe, but must go back to Mrs. Fram."

When Mrs. Merton had withdrawn—reluctantly, because she had hoped, at least, to have had one peep at the wonderful formula for that complicated unknown dish—the talk became languid and desultory in the morning-room, and the listeners in the library began to feel a desire to rise and move about, and then they heard the door of the morning-room open quickly.

It was Sarita who came hurriedly in, and, without waiting to close the door, she went straight to Miss Wardell and dropped an envelope into her lap. It was a blank envelope, tightly sealed, and she began volubly to explain:

"I found it, *Mais!* as I thought! It was in among my own letters; how, I do not even guess! It has gone quite from my head, what I did with it that day. But there it was, and I put it *at once* into the wrapper and sealed it *fast*, that the good Madam Fram might see that I did not carelessly leave it open to all eyes!"

She stopped, out of breath; and Ora Wardell took up the envelope, looked at it for a moment, as if in doubt, and thrust it calmly into her pocket, saying, as she arose:

"Thank you, Sarita. You were *over* kind in enclosing the recipe; but, as you have done so, I will deliver it into Mrs. Fram's hand as I received it; the 'seal' unbroken; and," slightly smiling, "I think I will advise her, *next* time, to entrust Mrs. Merton's recipes to surer hands than yours and mine. Mrs. Deering, I want to come another day, and at a more suitable hour, when I hope I may see Miss Rodney, as well as yourself."

She was at the door, and Brenda Deering made no attempt to detain her, only following her out into the vestibule, and bidding her a courteous adieu.

And in the library, having first taken the precaution to close the convenient door behind the *portière*, the detective, in flat opposition to his own set rules, caught his companion by the hand, and, shaking it with fervour, whispered :

" It's a big piece of luck ! If we go on like this we shall see my wild little theory develop, some day, into a *big* ASTOUNDING FACT !" And once more he wrung the doctor's hand. " Come," he added then, " let's get out of this ! "

Doctor Ware found himself waiting that night, with unusual excitement, and an impatience quite new to him, for the hour to come when he might join the disguised detective, and learn the meaning of his strange hints and prophecies. He had passed the long evening in the drawing-room, where, after dinner, all the household, by common consent, drew together, with the mutual idea of helping each other to carry on, at least, the outward show of a quiet family circle,—exempt from attempts at actual gaiety, because of the late trouble and affliction,—but still bound to carry out their respective rôles of hostess, friends, and guests ; drawn together by a common grief and loss ; rather than be, or seem, divided by vague doubts, diversity of beliefs, and shadowy, half-formed suspicions, as was, indeed, true of them, each and all.

To each, for some one particular reason, this task was one of more or less difficulty ; requiring an unusual effort, and making, of each moment, for most, a season of prolonged mental strain.

For Doctor Ware, now that his position was clearly defined in his own mind and in the eyes of his hostess, the strain was at the minimum and he was able to do his part in keeping up appearances with little effort.

To Murtagh the position was now actually agreeable, the very difficulty of his position and the intricacy of his plans, adding zest to his every moment.

As for Brook Deering, his oft-expressed anxiety lest the work of justice be retarded or bungled, and his weak and nervous condition together, made each moment irksome to him. And Bruce Deering, with the shadow of a fearful charge hanging over him, and sorrow and suspense his daily portion, went and came, grave, 'tis true, but filling his place, whether it might be beside Brook in his worse moments, or helping Brenda—left as she was so suddenly, with the care and oversight of a great house, full stables, and many acres—in the numerous ways in which a man can help as agent, adviser, and friend, when he has both the will and the full understanding of the situation.

Whatever else might have been spoken of Bruce Deering in these days of seeming inaction and suspense, he could not have been said to shirk the duties of the day as they came.

But hardest of all was the part allotted to proud Brenda Deering. Sincere by nature, she was forced to dissemble to act a part from morn till evening. But her strength grew with the emergency ; the latent force within her, the spirit that has carried many a brave woman

through dangers and woes unutterable, upheld her, kept her brow clear; her eye, and hand, and voice steady; and her mind alert and active. All this—*outwardly*. Alone, and in the darkness of midnight,—there were moments, yes, hours, when her soul rebelled; when despair shook her and she felt that her strength had forsaken her; but the morning found her calm again, strong as before, and at her post. Hostess, helper, friend, and mistress.

Brook Deering returned from his drive complaining of weariness; and as the evening advanced, and there were symptoms of renewed feverishness, Doctor Ware advised him to retire early from the drawing-room, and,—after some thought and a little hesitation,—gave him a draught to "soothe his nerves," he *said*, and he well knew,—without the precaution—which he took—of looking in upon the patient, a little later,—that sleep, long and sound, was *sure* to follow its administration.

Not long after Brook left the group in the drawing-room, "Uncle Holly" complained of fatigue, and "rheumatic twinges," and arose to leave the room.

"The fact is," he added, when he had made his excuses to the ladies, "I did not get my usual rest last night; I am not accustomed to sudden starts and wakenings, and last night I was suddenly aroused *several times* by *sounds*—sounds which at first I was unable to account for. Brenda, did you ever think that there might be rats in your walls?"

Brenda looked surprised, and Valentine, who had been unnaturally talkative all the day and evening, laughed a short laugh, which she checked suddenly.

"It would not be surprising," "Uncle Nat" went on. "That portion of your house, I think you said, is *old?*"

"Quite old," murmured Brenda.

"Well, we will see if they disturb me *to-night*. It's not so difficult to get rid of rats in a wall, as many think; and if one has a good trap—but we won't go into it to-night; I am really *quite* drowsy." And "Uncle Nat," with affable smiles, and a succession of amiable nods, went his way.

Doctor Ware and Bruce left the drawing-room last, the latter holding the door open to let the two ladies pass out before them. At Brook's door they both paused, and Bruce entered.

"He's sleeping quietly," he reported in a moment, "and William has followed his example. If he should continue to sleep like that, I fancy *I* can rest, without much effort, until late sunrise." He turned at his own door, and after a few more words they parted with a mutual good-night.

Mindful of Murtagh's instructions, Ware let a long hour pass, with provoking slowness it seemed to him, before he opened his door with the noiseless, accustomed touch acquired in many sick-rooms, glided through the darkness, feeling his way around the corner of the L, and found, as he had expected, the door of Murtagh's room ever so slightly ajar; then, as he pushed it gently open, he felt a light, guiding touch upon his arm, and knew in a moment that his host had closed the door and was moving across the room.

The next instant his eyes were dazzled by the light of a dark lantern suddenly opened directly before them, and, at sight of what its rays revealed, he almost exclaimed aloud.

Standing before him, with the lantern uplifted in his hand, was a man of sinister aspect, with shaggy eyebrows, a mat of coarse black hair, a face unshaven, it would seem, for many days, and pock-marked, and scarred most unpleasantly. He was dressed in garments that might long ago have been worn by some Bowry boy, with a taste for loud checks and gaudy colours; a red bandanna was knotted about his throat, and a shabby tourist's cap was stuck upon the back of his head.

The man with the lantern stood before him for a moment silent, and darkly scowling; and in that moment Doctor Felix saw, with an actual start, that the window nearest him was open, and that a rope-ladder dangled from its ledge, and lay across the floor quite to the stranger's feet.

"One might fancy," spoke he of the lantern, "that you don't like one's evening dress!" The tones were sullen, and utterly strange to the doctor, but the next words were uttered in the unmistakable voice of "Uncle Nat." "My *dear* doctor, were you *really*—for a moment in doubt?"

Doctor Ware took the lantern from his hand, and, holding it aloft, surveyed him critically.

"It's perfect!" he said as he put down the lantern. "And I am willing to own that, for a moment, I was all at sea." He glanced as he spoke toward the open window, and the detective sprang toward it and drew the almost closed curtains tightly together.

"No use of running an unnecessary risk," he said. "You see I was at work with *this*," picking up one end of the rope ladder, "when you pushed open the door." He turned the lantern's face toward the inner wall, and lowered the light until they were almost invisible to each other. "Take that chair beside you," he went on, speaking rapidly and just above his breath, "I must talk fast, and shall have to ask you to put your patience in leash, and begin *in earnest*, without more than a word of explanation. Of course, when you stop to think, you don't imagine that I got myself up in *this* rig just to surprise or play a joke upon you, *I* know! It takes too long to get up such a mug as this, I can tell you. The fact is, partner, I'm going to ask you to *wait* for my story, and for *me*, right here, until I come back from a little expedition that I find I must make to-night. I'm going down that ladder—that is if you'll stand by me, at this end of the rope, to draw it up when I'm down, and let it out when I come back."

"I *can't* refuse," replied Ware, soberly; "I'm enlisted, remember. Of course, it's understood that your errand concerns—this business?"

"Great heavens, man! do you suppose I'd let you into anything *else?* The fact is, I must go into Pomfret to-night, and I'll take just breath to tell you that I'm not going alone, that my pal is waiting for me at this moment—*where* do you think?"

"Don't let me waste your time in guessing," admonished Doctor Felix.

"Right you are! I'll *tell* you. I am to meet my man in the near

vicinity of the Pomfret *Bank*—of *the Wardell house,—and*—of ST. MARK'S CHURCH!"

In the silence following these words he examined his lantern, and began to draw out and adjust the limp lengths of rope ladder.

"If nothing happens to disturb our plans," he resumed, "I shall reach the place, do my work, and be here again, that *is*, down there on the ground below this window, in an hour and a half at latest. If I am *not* here by then, you may fancy me checkmated somehow, and, in *that* case, I must just—ask you to wait *here* until the peep of day. But there's little to risk, and you'll see me, I dare say, prompt to the minute; and *then*, my partner, we shall still have an hour or two before dawn, and you shall be enlightened so far as is in my power, at least. Now for the ladder, and the first act of the revised Romeo and Juliet."

The first act was sufficiently short. Murtagh slung the dark lantern safely at his side, and, the hook and the rope having been already tested, slipped over the sill, and vanished noiselessly into the darkness below; and the doctor, when assured by a quick jerk of the ladder that the new Romeo was on *terra firma*, drew up the tell-tale rope, and, feeling his way to "Uncle Nat's" lounging-chair, seated himself therein, and settled himself to wait and wonder, and, in spite of himself, to doze.

The hour passed between drowsy nods and sudden starts, and Doctor Felix was warned of this by the silvery striking of Uncle Nat's alarm clock, which, like his shower-bath, went, he assured the family, "everywhere with its master;" and, when the quarter had also passed, he drew the curtain, and took his station by the window. He had not long to wait before the signal, a slight scraping sound upon the stone wall below, told him that the ladder might once more descend; and, before the last quarter hour was half spent, the quondam Uncle Nat was safely landed in his own apartment, the rope ladder removed from the window-ledge, and our detective, still in his uncouth disguise, was sitting opposite Doctor Felix, while on the table between them, under the extended hand of the newly-arrived, lay a parcel, smaller than the hand above it, and carefully tied up in the detective's handkerchief.

"My partner," began the late Romeo, "I hope you won't mind my rig! It would take half of the little time we have left to us if I stopped to get off this paint and pigment. You've a right to see my face—the *real one*—and you *shall*, but just now—"

"Just now," broke in the doctor, with a smile, "you want to *talk* and I want to hear you. I'll be glad to see the face—later on."

"Good. Then, first, I'll tell you the result of my trip to-night, and that, naturally, will lead to the whole story, partner!" He drew the handkerchief toward him and began deftly to untie the knots. "We are coming out, after all, upon safe, solid ground, I verily believe! My trip to-night was a success! I believe you're going to prove my Mascott! Look here!"

He had opened the handkerchief, and taken from within it a folded piece of newspaper, and opening this with jealous care, he displayed to the astounded gaze of his "partner," a tiny bone, clearly the "second

joint" of a chicken; a scrap of mouldy cheese, some dry and dusty bread crumbs, and a folded fragment of newspaper, not half so clean as that in which these strange treasures were wrapped.

"Do you see these?" asked Murtagh, eagerly, and then, "Of course! —but you don't know what they *mean?*—their *value?* Well, sir, I wouldn't take a full purse for these scraps! and I'll tell you why!" He leaned forward and tapped the doctor's knee impressively, measuring his words by the taps. "These crumbs *I found in a closet of* ST. MARK'S CHURCH."

He caught up the piece of soiled and folded newspaper.

"See *this!*" he held it up for an instant, then put it carefully down, unopened, as he said slowly, "That scrap of paper is a fragment of the *New York World*, and it is dated *just thirty-six hours before Joe Matchin was murdered.*"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A VOLUNTEER.

WHEN Doctor Ware appeared at breakfast next morning, a close observer might have noted that his face was a shade graver and more thoughtful than usual, and that he seemed pre-occupied. He did not tarry in the breakfast-room, but went at once to make his morning call upon the invalid, who had not appeared below stairs, and who was reported as still weak, and "somewhat nervous," by the attentive William. Having paid this visit, Doctor Felix asked for a saddle horse, and, without soliciting a companion, rode off to the north, where he paced for an hour, along the country lanes and between wide fields of wind-blown grain, dewy and graceful, yet challenging his usually observant eye in vain.

For once in his controlled and self-contained existence, Doctor Felix felt the need of solitude; having gathered since the previous night much food for reflection.

But if he set out with a countenance full of gravity, not unmixed with anxiety, he returned looking like his usual calm self; his face full of strength and settled purpose. And, after luncheon, he excused himself to his hostess, pleading "an accumulation of writing," and remained closeted in his room until dinner-time. He spent his entire evening in the drawing-room, however, as did all the others of the household, except "Uncle Nat," who "felt twinges of rheumatism," shortly after dinner, predicted a storm before morning, and withdrew.

The following day a tall, saturnine man appeared, and was announced as a census-taker making a special canvass for some purpose, connected—so nearly as could be gathered from Mrs. Merton, who took him in charge and escorted him about, above stairs and below—with some "medical examination or enterprise;" certainly the dark-visaged, sharp-eyed census-taker asked an unusual number of questions, and threw the people below stairs into quite a flutter. And

when he had been seen, from Brook's corner window, to drive away in his road wagon through the south, or Pomfret, gate, Brook turned to his cousin, lounging with his newspaper at another window, and said :

"That's number *one*, I suppose? And now, under one pretext or another, they will give us no rest, I dare say. I wonder," he added, turning away with a feeble half laugh, "what our good Merton would say if told that she has just had a *detective* in tow?"

There was no reply from behind the paper at the other window, and, after a moment, he spoke again.

"I wonder, now, who will have the first sight of the reports from these fellows, and if they will be made known to all of us? The family, I mean, of course?"

"Can't say," replied Bruce ; and then, after a moment, and without lowering the newspaper, "Have never made inquiry."

"Nor been informed?"

"*Nor* been informed."

Two days later it was a pedlar who held the servants charmed in the housekeeper's room, and who seemed to value his time but lightly ; and it was William who reported his visit to his young master, who received the news with a careless comment, and a meaning side glance at his cousin, who was again present, and occupied, this time, with a newly-cut magazine.

"Do you want to wager that William's smooth-spoken pedlar was not another member of the police?" queried Brook when the servant had gone ; but Bruce shook his head.

"I should only lose, I dare say, if I did," he replied.

The next day Brook came down to breakfast, and spent much of the morning in the library with Uncle Nat, his cousin, and Doctor Felix, resting in the afternoon, and appearing again at dinner. The following day he once more tested his strength by a drive, this time with William in attendance ; and, from that time, he seemed slowly to gain strength and spirits, giving more of his time to the guests, and appearing, much in his old-time boyish way, in Brenda's boudoir —where Valentine sat so often now—or wherever the two ladies of the house might chance to be ; for, by a sort of unspoken, but mutual, consent, Valentine and Brenda were now together nearly all day, each seeming to shun solitude and her own society more and more as the days went on.

During his cousin's retirement Bruce Deering had shared his seclusion, for the most part, and with every appearance of willingness ; but now—as Brook began to resume his old habits of sociability, which sociability included even the snug room where Mrs. Merton reigned, and where Sarita was often found, busied with the household stitching, which had become, in part, her care—Bruce began to pass long hours in the spacious library, which Brook openly shunned, declaring that he missed his father doubly in that room containing so many mementos, and which had been so exclusively his. This room was also a favourite haunt with Doctor Felix, and, as the days passed, he and Bruce found much to say to each other, and many thoughts in common.

And so the time crept on, and Uncle Holly's first week and then his second had passed, and, save for the visits of the two "detectives," and the more or less frequent calls of Doctor Liscom, John Redding, or Mr. Baird, little seemed to have transpired at Beechwood to help on the cause in which all there were, in some way, interested; and the lives of all seemed to flow on in decorous quiet and retirement. They were seldom seen abroad, save when driving, usually upon some quiet, country road when the ladies were out, except when, upon one or two occasions, Brenda had called for her pony carriage, and had taken Uncle Holly to repay a visit from Mr. and Mrs. Baird or Doctor Liscom; or, when Doctor Ware and Bruce, and once or twice of late, Brook, had ridden through Main Street upon the handsome saddle horses that had been their dead master's pride.

Ora Wardell had not repeated her visit; but two or three times her carriage had been seen to dash past toward the north road, which, in pleasant weather, was one of Pomfret's favourite and much affected drives.

And so two weeks of "Uncle Holly's" stay at Beechwood passed into the third, and under the seeming calm of the household, a brooding, growing impatience was hovering, making the atmosphere almost electric, when, as the family, all save Brenda, were seated about the luncheon-table in the cool morning-room, where the sash was opened wide and the shades adjusted to shut out the growing heat of the summer sun, that lady entered with her hands full of letters and newspapers.

"Hall has just arrived," she said, approaching them; "and so I bring your letters to add a possible flavour to your luncheon. I trust—" with sudden sweet gravity and a moment of hesitation—"that the flavour may be agreeable." She turned toward a side table and put down upon it the handful of papers. "These," she said, "can very well wait," and with the disengaged hand, she began to distribute the letters.

There were several for Doctor Ware, two or three for Brook, a business-like looking document for Bruce, a single creamy-white letter for Valentine, two for Brenda herself, and, for Uncle Holly, not one.

Brook glanced at his envelopes and then across at his father's wife, who was just taking her place behind the tea equipage.

"Mamma Brenda," he asked, "is luncheon *sans cérémonie?* may we read and be pardoned for the act?"

"You heard me," she replied lightly. "I brought them to be read."

Amid the murmured thanks and the general opening o fenvelopes, no one seemed to notice that Valentine eyed the address upon her envelope in a puzzled, wondering fashion, opened her lips only to close them again; glanced quickly round the table, and—seeing the others engaged, all save Brenda and Uncle Nat, who were conversing quietly just opposite her, cut open the envelope with a long, silver pin, which she drew from among the lace upon her corsage. But the exclamation she uttered as she drew out the thick sheet, glanced at the fine, cramped writing, and took in, with the same look, the name written at the botton of the page, was audible to all, and brought from Brenda the quick question:

"Val—no bad news, is it?"

Valentine's face was flushing rosily, but she held up the lace pin to the general gaze, and murmured, with her eyes fixed upon the page, which she held quite near her face as she leaned back in her chair, "My—finger!" and seemed engrossed in her reading; the red still dyeing her face, to fade away into pallor as she read the last word, let the letter drop upon her lap, and then, recovering herself by a strong effort of will, glanced at it again, and with swift, nervous fingers, thrust both letter and envelope into her girdle, so that only a blank corner was visible above the soft, silken folds.

She was silent when the letters were put aside, and the meal began; and for some time she continued grave and *distraite*. But before they left the table she had recovered her usual manner, and did her full share in keeping the conversational ball moving.

When they arose from the table, however, and Brenda proposed that they all withdraw, for coolness, to the shady east lawn, Valentine did not accompany them; going to her room instead, and remaining there for more than an hour.

When she reappeared they were all upon the lawn; Brook was in a hammock, and the others were grouped about him, sitting, standing, or moving to and fro under the trees; and before she had been among them long, she had managed to engage "Uncle Nat's" company for a drive, immediately after tea.

"The truth is," she declared, standing before "Uncle Nat's" rustic chair, with her back against a tree, speaking with unusual animation, and with glowing cheeks and a strange gleam in her eyes, "the truth is, I have felt that Brenda, here, has been monopolising you, Mr. Holly; and I have not, usually, been left quite out of the running, here, at Beechwood. Is that not true, Cousin—Brook?" casting a momentary side glance toward the hammock.

Brook lifted himself, and a look of keen delight overspread his face as he fixed his eager eyes upon hers.

"If you appeal to me, fair Cousin Val," he said, in his softest tones, "*I* should say that *you* have generally been ahead of the field, and likely to keep so!" And he paused, as if eager for her next words. But she only uttered a short, half-mocking laugh, and, without so much as a glance in his direction, turned away.

An hour before sunset Miss Rodney's own pony phaeton, drawn by her swift-stepping black pony, Flash, swung out from the upper gate and went skimming forth upon the north road, with Uncle Nat leaning luxuriously back against the springy cushions, and Valentine sitting charmingly erect, holding her lively pony with a stiff rein, and giving him for the moment her full attention.

"Flash has not been out, except for what Brenda's groom calls a 'walk round,' for several days," she said, when they were fairly upon the highway; "and he's a stiff-necked little fellow when fresh; so, if you don't mind, I'll just give him a pretty stiff mile or so, and by that time he won't need *all* my attention."

"By all means," was the answer. "I shall not mind in the least, Miss Rodney;" and after a few moments of swift going, he added, in a tone of quiet approval, "I see you feel quite equal to him." And

Uncle Nat turned slightly so that he might watch her charming profile with a keen and speculative eye. He knew there was a meaning behind her seemingly off-hand proposal that he should drive with her "behind her pet pony," and he was willing to wait its development.

Little more was said until the willing pony, having carried them at a lively pace far beyond Beechwood and across a wide stretch of level country, slackened his speed of his own accord at the foot of a long gradual slope, which, knowing its length, and having already expended his first wind, Flash took at a steady deliberate pace.

Then Valentine turned toward him, and their glances met—hers serious and half inquiring, his mild and gently smiling.

"I have taken a liberty," she began slowly, but without hesitation, "in asking you to accompany me for a purpose which you may think impertinent, and which *would* be that, if my motive were not—what it is. May I beg you to hear me with patience until my motive is *clear* to you? and not to misjudge me, whether you agree with me or not?"

The disguised detective looked upon the honest earnest face, which was flushing now, and into the fine eyes, almost beseechingly fixed upon his own, and his smile deepened into actual benevolence.

"I can hardly fancy you saying *anything* which I would find very unpleasant, my dear Miss Rodney," he said, sitting more erect and assuming a more attentive air. "Do you mean—is it possible—that an old fellow like me can *serve* you in any way?"

"An *old* fellow?" Again her eyes scanned his face closely, inquiringly. "You shall hear;" she turned her gaze toward the pony and leaned back in her turn against the cushion, so that she might look at him now and then as she spoke, and began:

"You know, of course, my position in my cousin's home, and how much we have been together. I hope I need not say that Brenda is as dear to me as an own sister could be? She has been overwhelmed with trouble of late; and, while I have mourned with her, if not like her, I have been tormented with the thought that I am, after all, really of so little use or comfort; and I *want* to help them all *so much!* I mean—of course, the family;" she flushed, as the two words "them all," slipped from her tongue, and shot a quick, half-defiant glance at him. But his eyes were half closed; he was listening with polite interest, and he murmured as she paused a moment:

"Of course, naturally."

"Day after day, as I have seen Brenda holding up so bravely against such fearful trouble, such awful suspense, I have grown almost *wild* to think that things cannot be made better—clearer! But, long as I might to do something, I have seen no way open to me; though, ever since you came among us, I have thought—".

He was looking at her quite keenly now, and she broke off abruptly, and flicked the slowly mounting pony to cover a momentary embarrassment and annoyance.

"You have thought—" he suggested.

"I have thought," she exclaimed, with a sudden force, "what I think *now*—that I *must beg you* to help me!"

Still his face was half smiling, and the voice was still the mellow, amiable voice of Uncle Holly.

"*Can* I help you, do you think? Pray, tell me how?"

She thrust her hand into the pocket of her light jacket and pulled out a letter. "If you will hear me when you have read this letter," she said, holding the document in her hand with the address concealed, "and remember, please, that it was *not* altogether a surprise to me—the *contents* I mean. I will *tell* you *why*—if I may!"

She held out the letter, but without taking it he put up his hand.

"One moment," he said, with no change of countenance. "That is the letter you received at the luncheon-table, is it not?"

"Yes."

"And it gave you a considerable shock?"

"Ah! you saw!"

"So great a shock that you could not feel quite yourself afterwards. You were impatient for this moment?"

"Oh! you see everything!"

"I saw *that!*" he smiled anew. "Now, does this letter concern yourself or me?"

"You *most.*"

"Then I will read it."

She watched him eagerly while he read with a perfectly serene face from the first word to the last, and as she looked her amazement grew.

For this is what he read.

Redlands, California,
June 3rd, 188—

"My Dear Young Lady,—Will you kindly give me information from Beechwood, and so oblige and relieve the anxiety of an old man.

"I was in the mountains last week, and there met a tourist who has been, earlier in the season, a guest of your pastor (I believe he is your pastor), Rev. Mr. Arden of Pomfret; and he tells me that at the time of his departure my dear niece Brenda was in trouble; that her husband (who had lately returned from New York, where he had been on account of his health) was lying very ill, and that at his last hearing on the day of his departure, Mr. Deering's life was despaired of. I was also informed that you, fortunately, were with my poor niece, and as I am in doubt how to address her, I write to ask news from you. Kindly let me know the truth, so that I may write Mrs. D—— fittingly without inflicting needless shock or jar upon her nerves; also tell me if, in your opinion, I could be of any *use* or comfort were I to *come to Pomfret.*—Yours most respectfully,

"Nathan Holly."

From beginning to end he had read the note slowly, and now as he refolded it and slid it carefully back into its envelope, Valentine fancied that she could detect the shadow of a quizzical smile about the corners of his mouth and lurking in his eyes. But it was gone in a moment, and he gave back the letter with grave politeness.

"It's quite exciting," he said without the faintest sign of excitement. "May I ask you, Miss Rodney, just what your sensations *were*, when you first read that letter? I am curious to know."

She was sure of the quizzical smile in the eyes, now, though the mouth was grave; and she met it with a little half-defiant smile in return.

"I had not been without my suspicion," she replied. "But it *was* a surprise, after all. I think, above all, I was glad!"

"Glad?"

"Yes. Glad, because it gave me my chance! Up to that time I could not approach *anyone*, in the way I wished."

"And now?"

"And now—Oh! I see it all *now!* And I hope I have done right in coming to you with this letter!"

"Oh, I see! And on account of this other Mr. Holly, *I* am to be ousted, I suppose? driven out of my snug nest, just as I am so comfortably settled? Or, am I to be blackmailed? Is *that* it, young lady?"

In spite of the gravity of the occasion her eyes were laughing now, and her retort came promptly.

"You are to be blackmailed," she declared.

"Then—will you name your terms?"

"I want you to take me, at least, a little way into your confidence, into *partnership!* I am so anxious, and there is *so much* to be done. Will not money, *any* sum, help, or hasten matters? Cannot—"

"Wait! Oh, we are going too fast! you have not told me yet who I *am*, if I am *not*, as you seem to think you have reason for believing, Mr. *Holly?*"

"I don't know *who* you *are*. But I think I know *what* you are."

"A—burglar—perhaps?"

"I think you are *a detective!*"

"Ah! And why, please? This is growing interesting."

"Because I happen to know that a detective was especially needed, and was witness to the interview wherein it was decided that a detective should be secured *at once*, and set to work upon this case. And, oh! there is *so much need!* Every moment since that decision, I have kept my eyes and ears open. I felt that a detective *must* come into the house, to do the work well. To succeed at all, in fact! And when I was told that the work was begun, but that the detective preferred to work in perfect secrecy, and would approach the house later, and in 'his own way,' his 'interest' being chiefly 'with the servants!'" She paused for a moment, but he made no comment, and she went on. "When I heard *that*, I said to myself, the first stranger who enters this house will be the *detective*, and when *you* came, I saw at once how easy it would be for a *false* 'Uncle Holly' to come among us! He was here for so short a time, and Bruce, Brook, and I were all absent. You played your part so well, however, that I could not *quite* believe you were not genuine! And then came the others, the census man, and the notion pedlar, and *then* I almost gave you up, and I began to fret anew, because everything seemed to drag so, and we are all shut off from mutual confidence by the awful thought that *someone* at Beechwood *must* have poisoned my dear guardian!" Her voice broke, and she turned away her face.

And now her companion put up his hand, and removed *his* disguising spectacles. Thrusting them into an inner pocket and drawing himself erect at her side, with an air of quiet authority, he took the reins from her half-unconscious hands; the pony had long since passed the brow of the hill and had been ambling along at his own will through a hedge-bordered lane.

"*Now*," he said, in a cheery and utterly changed tone, "you can

give your whole attention to our conversation, Miss Rodney, and we will talk seriously. It begins to look as if I were to be pretty well known at Beechwood, where I *meant* to be quite *incog.*; but I will say, at once, that I am not, by any means, sorry that this has happened! I know how *much* Mrs. Deering trusts you, and how high is her regard for you; and I should be but a poor judge of human nature if I could not read your character; I can see zeal, loyalty to friends, and ample courage, when courage is needed; and now, without betraying a trust, or revealing other people's secrets, *how* can I serve you?"

She hesitated for a time, then—"May I ask some questions?" she queried.

"You may! I will try to answer you."

"May I know how many, beside Brenda, know what you are?"

"One other."

"May I ask—" she hesitated again.

"Who that one is?"

She nodded.

"I will tell you who it is *not*. It is neither of the Deerings."

"Oh! then it *is* Doctor Ware! I am so *glad!*"

"Is that all?"

"No, indeed! I must not ask about my uncle's murder *now*, but I so much wish to know if it was *you* who were called upon when—when Joe Matchin was killed?"

"It was I."

"*Oh!*" Her face was all aglow with strong feeling. "Then, may I know if *anything*—is being done in that case? and why were you withdrawn from it? My guardian used to talk to me about it a little, at first, and then, one evening, when I had been asking him questions, he began to tell me how there were reasons why the detective, whom he considered very able, had been *withdrawn from the case!* There was no case, he said, no strong proof, against his nephew, and so it would not be pushed, unless it transpired, later, that Bruce—his nephew, was in actual danger, which *he* thought improbable. He was about to say more, but Doctor Liscom came in just then and the talk was never renewed. Can you tell me *why* they took this course? Were you withdrawn from the case?"

"I was withdrawn from the case;—yes. And *no* reason was given to *me*."

"But you *knew it!*—you *guessed?*"

"Perhaps! It was *only* a guess,—however."

"I see that I must not press that point. Did Mr. Deering—*Bruce*, consent to your withdrawal?" She flushed and her voice shook, but her look was persistent.

"He did."

"And can he be vindicated then? as the case now stands?"

"Vindicated? Hardly, I think, unless his lawyers have been at work, unknown to me."

She turned half round, and put a hand upon his arm.

"Mr.—" she began, and stopped with an inquiry in her eyes.

"Call me—Ferriss," he said.

"Mr. Ferriss, will you take up that case again?"

"The Matchin case?"

"Yes. Will you begin where you left off, and *prove* Bruce Deering innocent—or *guilty?*"

"And the other? Your guardian's murder?—what of that?"

"Are the two incompatible?"

"Are they *not?*"

"I do not think so," eyeing him closely.

"Why?"

"Because I believe the two crimes are *connected!*"

He changed the reins from his right hand to his left, and turned to face her.

"Tell me!" he said, almost sternly, "all that you *know*, *guess*, or *suspect* concerning both these cases!"

"I *know* very little," she replied. "But I have known Bruce Deering for years, and I know he is not guilty! I cannot give reasons for all that I believe. Women, you know, are governed by instincts, intuitions often, and I have felt, from the first, that these two murders, coming so close together, are connected in some way; and—there is *one* person whom—I—*suspect.*"

"Of what?"

"Of a knowledge—of some sort—of *both* affairs."

"Will you name this person?"

"When I have your answer. *Will* you resume work upon the other case? I have money—all you can use; no matter how much. Why not take *me* for a client, as well as my cousin Brenda?"

"I will; but upon other terms. If I 'resume,' *will you aid me?*"

"How?" eagerly.

"As you can with ease. I will not ask you to betray yourself to others; it must not be guessed that you know me, other than as 'Uncle Holly;' but you can help me now, at once!"

"Tell me how!"

"By sending away your maid, and taking one whom *I* shall recommend. Will you do it?"

Firm and unhesitatingly came the answer.

"*Yes;*" and then, "Is that *all?*"

They had reached a point where the lane broadened and turned eastward; the sun was setting, and the spires of a pair of village churches could be seen in the distance.

"Had we not better turn here?" he asked, and then, "What village is that to eastward?"

"Fairleigh. Yes, we had better turn; we are five miles from home." They turned about and slowly began their homeward drive.

"We must come to a better understanding," he said, after a brief silence. "Tell me, whom do you suspect—and *why?*"

"I have seen," she began, "that you have interested yourselves in the servants, and are quite popular with them. What do you think of Madam Sarita?"

He started. "Do you suspect *her?*" he exclaimed.

"Yes," dropping her voice.

"And upon what grounds? Come now," with sudden animation,

"let's be as frank as we can; and, on my part, can I tell you anything more?"

"Yes, I am wondering so much how one man can keep this case, not to mention the other, in hand. Are you really working alone?"

"If I tell you, may *I* ask the next question?"

She laughed for the first time. "Yes," she said.

"Then I have here, in Pomfret, *four* besides myself; and in other places, four others. In a week there will be *more*."

"Oh," she ejaculated, "I begin, for the first time, to hope!"

CHAPTER XL.

"MY PRETTY COUSIN VAL."

VALENTINE RODNEY came down the steps, which led from the rear door of the big central hall of Beechwood, and, glancing about her, took her way across the lawn to seat herself, after another swift glance, upon one of the rustic benches under the trees, where the hammocks were swung, and where the family had gathered the day previous.

It was a favourite place for all, though it was seldom visited so early in the day. But Valentine wanted to be alone, and to think; and the book which she carried, somewhat ostentatiously, a large and serious looking volume, was brought as a barrier between herself and any chance morning promenader. She sat, for a long half-hour, with the volume open in her hand, and never turned a page, until the sound of a step upon the gravel, very near her, and a rustling of the low-bending branches that shut in and made of the spot a peaceful bower, startled her, and she turned two pages with hasty fingers, and unseeingly.

It was Bruce Deering who stood before her, looking down upon her with a grave half smile, and, for a moment, in utter silence; then—

"Am I disturbing you *very* much?" he asked, and the young woman who had fairly braved the detection so shortly before, cast down her eyes and murmured a faint and low-spoken "N—no."

"Because," he went on, "if I am not, I would be glad to sit here, and to talk with you for—a few moments."

With the last words he sank down in the hammock nearest her, where he could look her full in the face, with scarce a yard of nature's green carpet between them; and as she was still silent, he went on easily:

"My cousin is in consultation with Doctor Ware this morning, and, if not actually *de trop*, I was not needed. It seems a rare chance to find you here—and alone!"

There had been a time when these two were the frankest and friendliest of comrades for a long period; and then, a briefer time, when, upon her part, a shade of shyness and maidenly reserve had made her even more charming; a time when there were no more meetings half way, no more eagerness for the rides, the archery, boating and tennis, that had been their almost daily summer sports; but

when *sought* she was as charming as ever, if not so openly cordial; and he had not seriously objected, at first, to this change. Then had come the blight upon him, the death of Joe Matchin, with its attendant calamities.

Perhaps he was thinking some such thoughts of their past and present as he sat looking into her downcast face, for she had hardly raised her eyes from her book, and after his last words, silence again fell between them, until, with a momentary compression of her curved red lips, she gathered her courage up, and, closing the book, asked, with that air of making conversation which most of us know very well:

"How is my Cousin Brook this morning?"

"Stronger, I think; but unaccountably nervous. He has taken a most singular fancy."

"Indeed! May I hear it?"

"I think I may confide it to you. Brook says that he has been kept awake during the night by *footsteps* directly overhead."

"In the mansard!" she exclaimed in genuine surprise. "He was dreaming—of course!"

"Very likely," he answered, "but it has taken hold of him strongly, this fancy. I never imagined Brook was so superstitious."

"Superstitious?"

Bruce bit his lip.

"Well, he seems to insist that there was *really someone* up there, you know, and, of course, *that* is impossible."

"Of course!" she assented, and then added, "He must be very nervous."

"He is. Really, it seems to me that is his worst ailment now. Still he is growing stronger, losing that unusual pallor, and the strange staring look of the eyes. He's not strong, of course, anyone can see that."

"Oh, yes," she assented; "Brook was never strong—like you."

He looked up quickly, the half smile upon his face fading to deepest gravity.

"Ah," he sighed, "I am not strong now. I, too, have been shorn of my strength—in a different way."

She met his eyes now, quite in the old way; and said, with a little touch of impatience in her voice:

"By whom?—and how?"

"Ah, I think you know! To stand blindfolded in the presence of an enemy—an enemy that threatens honour and perhaps life, and to know no way of discovering this enemy, have no weapon with which to fight him—is it not enough to weaken one? to make him a coward almost?"

She leaned toward him now, her eyes challenging his.

"Has it made you a coward?" she asked slowly.

"At times."

"Since when?"

"Ah!" he said wearily, "you ask a hard question; and if you keep on I shall lose the courage I had when I came to you. I came—to ask you a question—Valentine!"

She stirred uneasily, but was silent.

"May I ask it?"

"Yes." Her eyes had fallen again.

"When this calamity first fell upon me," he began, "and when I first saw you afterwards, you met me with hand outstretched, and you let me see, without speaking a word, that you still had faith in me; that the hideous accusation against me had not shaken that faith; at least that is how I interpreted you; was I wrong?"

"No," came the low answer.

"I was glad then—more glad than I can tell you; and it helped me to hold up my head and face my accusers calmly. But, later—before long, there came a change. You did not meet me with faith in your eyes; *you shunned me*, or, when we did meet, you *avoided* my glance, and—you have not put out your *hand* to me *since*." He paused, and sighed heavily. Her face had grown pale; her hands were tightly gripped about the book in her lap, and she did not lift her eyes nor speak.

"Once," he resumed, "I would have *asked* the reason for this change, *as my right*. *Now*, I *beg* you to tell it me!"

Suddenly the small head became erect, and the dark eyes flashed in his face.

"*Why* should you *beg* now what you had a right to *demand* once? Tell me *that*, Bruce Deering; *then* I can answer you!"

"Why?" He drew himself erect, and his answer came slowly, with sorrowful dignity: "Why? Because I am a man accused—*and with no defence*."

"No *defence?*" Her eyes were kindling.

He shook his head: "So it seems."

"Not even '*Not Guilty?*'"

"*That* I *can* say, thank God! But will *saying it* be enough, think you?"

"*Yes!* If you can honestly say no more!" And now they are both upon their feet: "Now, will you let *me* put a question?"

"Anything," he replied gently. *Her* last words had been almost fierce.

"When we first met after that accusation against you, and I held out my hand to you, you had no other thought than to fight this awful charge to the last! Is it not so?"

"Yes," slowly.

"Is it your intention *still?*"

He started, and a look of surprise overspread his face; then he said, still very gently:

"I shall declare myself *not guilty*, and I shall *defend* myself as best I can."

"Defend yourself? Yes! But how about the detective who was to seek for the real culprit? the *true* murderer? *Why* has *he* given up this case? *Why* are you left to *defend yourself?* *I* am not the *only* one who has changed."

He threw back his head. There was a new look in his eyes.

"And is *that* the reason why—"

"Is it not reason *enough?*" she broke in, almost fiercely. "What

am I to think of a man who *voluntarily* throws away his chances for vindication because he thinks that there is 'not proof enough' to convict him, and that, therefore, he will be acquitted? *Why* should your friends care for you who care so little for yourself? And the *assassin?* What right have you to let *him* escape?"

For a long time, or so it seemed, he stood before her with head bowed and a troubled look. Then he lifted his face, and it was very sorrowful, but gentle still.

"Valentine," he said sadly, "*this* is the hardest moment of any since that fateful night. I would give my right hand if I could vow to you, here and now, that I *would* go from your presence and fight for my complete vindication with all the energy, all the power, at my command!—but—I would give my *very life* to hear you say that, in spite *of all*, in the face of *all*, you believe in me still! The opinion of the world is of some value to me; my friends' opinion is very dear; but *yours* is above price—and—I see—I have lost—it!" He turned away his head, and his lips quivered under their shadowing moustache.

She drew a sharp breath, and said, in a quick suppressed voice:

"Then the detective *is* withdrawn by your wish?"

He turned sharply. "By my *wish? No!*"

"By your consent *only?*"

"Yes."

"I see!"

"What?" he demanded proudly.

"I see; I understand! My guardian told me a little! Bruce Deering, you have given up your chance of vindication *with uncle's consent*, and that means that you—*both* of you—wished, if possible, to screen another! It will not be possible!"

"Not! and why?"

"Because you have no authority to say to the wheels of justice, 'Pause!' The search for Joe Matchin's assassin is to be reopened *with vigour!* There, don't question me! I may have my secrets too, I suppose. Joe Matchin's slayer must be found! Hush!"

Someone came hurrying over the grass from the direction of the house; and, as she drew quickly back, and nearer the rustic bench, the branches were again thrust aside.

"Oh—ah! *here* you are!" said Brook Deering, coming to his cousin's side, and linking an arm within his. "Ware left me, and advised exercise, so I set out to find you. What say you to a drive? Hervey will bring up my roadster shortly, and you may drive him—for once."

Bruce stood silent for a moment and then drew back, relieving himself from his cousin's grasp; a shadow had fallen upon his face, and he let his eyes rest for a moment upon the girl, who was also moving back a little, and stooping to take up the book which had slipped from her hand to the rustic seat. When she had lifted her head, and stood again upright, the book clasped between her two hands, he said, with another straight look into her eyes:

"If I am to be your charioteer, Brook, I must prepare for my 'honourable' position, and so—" He bowed to Valentine, strode past

Brook, and took a step or two in the direction of the gravelled path leading to the terrace.

"Oh, we won't set out quite yet," said Brook, languidly. "And as I am quite ready, unless Ware should think fit to prescribe a top-coat, I'll even sit here and keep *ennui* away from our fair cousin," smiling across at Valentine, and letting himself slide down into the hammock in an indolent attitude.

At his first words Bruce had paused with one hand upraised and grasping an overhanging bough; and before he had released his grasp or withdrawn his gaze from the two, Valentine had stooped and, catching up the trailing draperies of her sombre tea-gown, turned toward another outlet.

"Your fair cousin has loitered long enough with a dull book, and thinks it her duty to look after the welfare of Brenda and her guests. If you feel equal to the exertion you might aid me in such a very laudable effort; otherwise, I must leave you to your hammock and solitude;" and, before Brook could reply or bestir himself to join her, she had swept aside a bending bough, and Bruce, glancing across his shoulder as he strode away, saw her sweeping across the grass toward the east door, with a brisk springing step, and head held very erect; and the shadow upon his face lifted somewhat. As she mounted the curving steps, and he turned up the terrace walk, their eyes met for one instant, and when they had turned, going there separate ways, there was a softer look, almost a smile, upon each face.

Meantime Brook Deering, sitting in the idly swinging hammock, was wrinkling his brows, and saying to himself, "I wonder what they were saying! I wonder—Jove! it *looked* as if they had been quarrelling!" And he set the hammock lazily a-swing, murmuring as he watched her go lightly up the steps, "My pretty cousin, Val! It is hard lines on a fellow—this waiting!"

CHAPTER XLI.

"RATS."

THEY were seated around the late breakfast-table next morning, all save "Uncle Holly," when that usually prompt and genial personage entered the morning-room; and it was plain to all—as he dropped into his high-backed chair and began to unfold his napkin with fidgety fingers—that something was amiss; and when, having said good-morning to the assembled group, he began to sugar his coffee, and butter his toast carelessly, and with evident preoccupation, there was a quick exchange of glances, and Brook Deering, sitting opposite him, spoke for them all.

"Mr. Holly, is it possible that you have been robbed of your sleep, or been visited with unpleasant dreams? You hardly seem yourself this morning, and we have grown to look to *you* for the one reliable cheerful morning face."

"Uncle Holly" started, lifted his eyes from his plate, and caught at this straw of sympathy with avidity.

"Young man," he said severely, and laying down his fork that he might give his full energies to the story of his trouble, "young man, if you ever become the head of this house, which I trust may not be for a long time," inclining his head toward Brenda; "when you do, in heaven's name make a raid upon the *rats!* Give them a vent, for there must be *millions* within these walls, and let them all escape to the stables, or elsewhere; anywhere out of doors!"

There was a properly subdued smile of amusement upon the face of Brook Deering, who was, or believed himself to have been, responsible for this unexpected tirade; and a little questioning half-smile rested for a moment upon the lips of Valentine Rodney; while Bruce, whose eye the speaker had caught, and was holding with his own, as he hurried on, looked simply a polite listener.

But Doctor Ware and his hostess looked up with serious faces, and this thought came into the mind of each: "He is setting a trap for someone."

"I have often, I know," went on the speaker, "been the subject of good-natured smiles, and sometimes ill-natured ridicule, because of this 'foible,' as some would call it. But it is a fact that I have, always, since my earliest recollections, been possessed of a loathing and horror of those ugly rodents. That, I am persuaded, after long experience and much thought, is an inheritance! Yes, miss," turning sharply upon Valentine, "you may smile, but—the hours I have spent in childhood, yes, and ever since, lying in torment listening to the gnaw, gnaw, gnawing of those creatures, sometimes far away, and again so near, that often I have been almost convulsed with fear lest the loathsome creatures should force their way through wainscot, or lath and plaster, and leap upon me! *Ugh!*"

He stopped an instant to clutch at his vanishing napkin, and the small gap was at once filled in by a chorus of sympathetic voices in comment, question, exclamation, during which Uncle Holly sugared his coffee for the second time, and made a wild effort to reply to them all in a sentence.

"Yes, Mrs. Deering, it *was* in my room. Near?—*Yes!* and *very* distinct. Got up?—CERTAINLY! *Sat* up! and STAYED up! All night?—I should think they *did!* Yes, Miss Valentine, that *is* the reason. It's enough to make one pale. No, sir," this to Brook, "it was *not* a nightmare! it was *night rats*, in the mansard."

The subject outlasted the breakfast hour, and probably was never more thoroughly discussed, or longer listened to, by lips and ears polite. When they came out from the morning-room, which they did one at a time, or each according to his pleasure, Brenda and Doctor Ware chanced to be the last to rise; and, after a few careless words, she went over to the broad French window and stepped out upon a little balcony, which could be approached only from the morning-room, and which was just beneath the balcony which was her own exclusive haunt, opening as it did from her *boudoir* above.

She stood for a moment looking out over the lawn, and Doctor Ware, after hesitating a moment at the door, through which he was about to

pass, turned and crossed the room with quick steps, coming out upon the balcony beside her, and standing there silent, for a moment, after making some allusion to the charming view, and the success of her landscape gardener.

As he was about to re-open his lips to give utterance to another polite platitude, she looked up at him, and moved a step nearer, saying:

"Doctor, do you think he was in earnest?"

He did not affect to misunderstand, but met her half way, and with a little quick glad thrill. He had not dared hope for so much from her reticence.

"About the rats, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I think he was very much in earnest—that is—" He hesitated.

"You mean, he is leading up to something?" she affirmed.

"That—yes. To be frank, I have had no hint of this new departure; but I fancy there is something he wishes to do, or to find out, and this is his way of beginning."

"I think you must be right; though, like yourself, I have been told nothing. It's a queer way—" She stopped short. "I wonder—" she began again, and then she smiled slightly. "It may be an absurd fancy, but, did you hear him ask me if he might look for signs of rats in the mansard?"

"Ah!" he ejaculated, and then glanced back into the morning-room.

"There is no one there," she said, calmly.

"Then," he resumed, "I will venture to say that, so far from being an absurd fancy, I believe you have hit it. For some reason he wants to rummage in the mansard. It was clever in him not to attempt a secret search, to take this open course. I do not mean to disregard your wish to have no discussions of your business, Mrs. Deering. But, pray, allow me to say now, that I have strong faith in this man. And —I thank you for permitting me to—to know, and to help, if I am able."

It was not an ardent speech, but his dark face flushed, and her cheek was rosy, as she turned it away.

"Don't!" she said, gently. "The gratitude—*all* must come from *me!* And I can see how he values your aid. I trust—" her voice broke, but was steadied in an instant—"I trust that the time may come when I can thank you with a heart at ease—just now—" she made a little deprecating gesture.

"Just *now*," he said, gravely, "you have little to thank me for; and yet—I am well rewarded by your confidence."

Someone opened the door of the morning-room, and Brenda stepped to the window.

"What is it, Sarita?" she asked, seeing the new comer.

"Mrs. Deering—madam, may I speak with you—just a word, if you please?"

Meantime Valentine had left the morning-room with Bruce Deering at her side. She was an enthusiastic horse-woman, and was going out to the paddock to look at a handsome chestnut mare which was the property of Bruce, and which had been lately brought in from

the big pasture on the northern boundary of the Beechwood estate, by his orders, to be placed at her service.

"Diana will need a bit of handling, I fancy," Bruce was saying as they came out into the wide hall. "And you may not find her to your liking if she *is*—"

"She *will* be to my liking!" Valentine hastened to say. "I saw her, you know, when she passed through on her way to the north meadow, the day she came home. But you—do you not propose to ride her? She must surely be far superior to uncle's old Max?"

He shook his head gravely. "I do not ride," he said, "except with Brook, and Uncle Lys left Max to my care, you know. It would please me if you would use Di, and you won't be too proud to accept such a small favour?"

"No, indeed!"—a touch of indignation in her voice. "I—" She stopped short, and the tiniest of frowns flitted across her face, and was barely caught by Bruce, as Brook, who had been loitering in the hall, came toward them smiling, and said:

"You are going to see that dangerous steed, of course; may I join you, Cousin Valentine? My advice may prove of value, you know; it will be disinterested, while Bruce's—"

"May wish to discourage me, do you think?" she broke in. "Come, by all means, Cousin Brook; a fine horse is always a thing worth seeing." But no smile accompanied her invitation.

As they passed the niche near the eastern, or rear, door of exit, from which the back stair was curved upward, they passed—evidently to Brook's amusement—the woman Sarita and "Uncle Holly" in earnest conversation. Sarita stood at the foot of the stairs, and Mr. Holly, standing a couple of steps above her, seemed to be arguing or explaining some point volubly, and with much earnestness.

"That's a queer old gentleman!" Brook broke out, as they passed down the steps and beyond hearing. "Talking there to Sarita, just as he would to one of us, hat in hand, and with all his ten fingers flying. I wonder if there is a servant upon the place that he does not take an interest in?"

"His interest seems very harmless," said Bruce, carelessly.

"And exceedingly amiable," added Valentine, demurely.

"Oh, exceedingly!" agreed Brook, laughingly. "A good talkative soul, with a touch—just a surplus, you know, of inquisitiveness."

"Inquisitiveness?" It was Bruce who took up the word. "Is that the right word? I have never found him so."

Brook smiled languidly. "Perhaps you are not an object of interest to our Uncle Holly," he drawled. "Now *I* am. He has said as much—"

"Really?" Valentine looked up with sudden interest. "Do you *mean* it?"

"I do, indeed! Some of you good people must have given him a vivid description of our railway accident, for he evidently thinks me a fine example of hero and victim! I had to tell him all about it, and much personal history besides; indeed, my 'life and adventures' seem to interest him greatly! I wonder, now, if he takes an equal

interest in—yourself, for instance?" And he turned a mock, serious gaze down upon Miss Rodney.

There was just the briefest interval of silence, and then she responded in the same half-jesting manner:

"Don't flatter yourself that *you* are the sole object of interest! I'll venture to say that Mr. Holly could tell you several things about me that you don't know." Then, with a quick side glance in the direction of Bruce, she added: "You can't say, at least, that he is not a perfectly good-natured questioner?"

"Oh, not at all. His amiability is, beyond *question*. Has he made *you* an object of interest, eh, Bruce?" and Brook laid a hand upon his cousin's arm in a gesture which was almost caressing, and quite characteristic.

But Bruce Deering neither turned his head nor smiled. "In *my* observations of Mr. Holly," he said, almost coldly, "I have never discovered him wanting in *tact*. Besides," he added, with a touch of bitterness, "information concerning *me* is plentiful now, at *second hand*."

"Not at *Beechwood*, I trust!" the words flashed from Val Rodney's lips involuntarily, and then a hot wave of colour dyed her cheeks, and, when Bruce Deering's dark eyes sought hers across his cousin's shoulder, she turned her own away. But he had seen, for just one instant, the real Valentine looking out from the lovely, earnest, protesting eyes, and there was a throb at his heart half pain, half pleasure, as, seeing black Diana in the paddock just ahead, he went quickly forward, and to relieve the embarrassment, called to the groom who held her by the long halter strap.

"Bring her forward, Hall; let us try her with the blankets and side-saddle."

As he moved away, Brook came closer, and said almost in a whisper:

"Ah, my Cousin Val, you are a loyal friend, and a strong partisan!"

And again the words leaped from her lips:

"I wonder, can anyone say the same of *you?*"

And then they were at the paddock fence, and Bruce was introducing her to Diana. But not until, as before, eye had challenged eye, and Brook's were startled and reproachful, hers defiant, and—something more.

. . . . . .

When Uncle Holly and Sarita had finished their brief talk, he came down the steps and walked along one of the garden paths until he came upon Doctor Ware, who sat smoking upon a rustic bench. Across the garden they could see Valentine and the two young men watching Diana's paces at the paddock fence, and, beyond them, in the opposite direction, one of the maids was gathering flowers for the dining-room, just out of hearing.

Nothing could have seemed more aimless than the detective's slow approach and easy halt beside the doctor's seat, where, for a moment, he stood as if in indecision, finally seating himself slowly, and slowly beginning to roll a cigarette; as he shaped the little paper between his fingers and thumb and began to sift the fine tobacco into it, he

seemed engrossed in the act, but what he was saying in a low undertone was :

"What do you think that woman was saying to me?"

"Sarita?" Doctor Ware had witnessed the brief interview from his seat in the shade, and was by no means surprised at the question. "I can't imagine!"

"Umph! she has heard *already* that I am purposing a *rat hunt.* And she stopped me to assure me that she 'feared she had disturbed me,' that she had heard through Mrs. Merton how I had been annoyed in the night by strange sounds, which I attributed to the rats ;—the truth was, she said, that she had been very restless, and had been moving about in her room. In fact she must have made more noise than she supposed. She had lost some little things in her room, and being really in a fidget, had tried to work it off by moving her furniture about and opening and shutting drawers in an effort to find the lost little things."

He had rolled his cigarette, and he now stopped to light it.

"What do you think of that?" he said, when he had taken one or two pulls at his little weed.

The doctor smiled.

"Don't ask *me*," he said, "I haven't the key."

"Of course," resumed the other, waiving this, "she didn't tell me this as *I* have told it—all in one breath ; one or two questions from me drew it all out. Her object in addressing me," she said, "was simply to assure me that she did not think there was a rat in the *whole house; certainly not* in *the mansard*, where she was sure a *rat* would *starve*, there being nothing there to draw the creatures. If it had been the cellars now—" He stopped short and laughed.

"I see," said the doctor, quietly, "that *you* find a meaning in all this. Am I to be enlightened?"

"Surely! it's plain enough : Madam Sarita does not want me to go into the attic."

"No!"

"In proof of which, hear this ; when we parted, and I thanked her as one naturally would for being relieved from the fear of the near proximity of *rats*, she said very ingeniously that she was very glad that she had saved me the task of hunting among the dust and cobwebs of the attic for what could not *possibly* be there."

"Ah?" the doctor turned and faced him, taking the half-consumed cigar from between his lips, "I see! You think the woman has some reason for not wishing you to explore the attic?"

"I am *sure* of it!"

"Then, if it were not like carrying my coals to Newcastle, I would say, better explore the attic *at once.* How do you know she is not there *now?*"

Murtagh pointed to the rear of the big house, where the ground sloped downward and the windows of a half basement, which jutted out beneath a portico, faced them.

"Do you see those basement windows?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Well, just as we separated, and Sarita was about to enter the

house—in which case I should have re-entered also, of course—Mrs. Merton, good soul, threw up one of those sashes and called to Madam Sarita something was amiss in the laundry. I have not lost sight of the place, and Sarita is there still." He was silent a moment, then he said, "I wish I could get into that mansard for half an hour and be sure that neither Mrs. Deering nor Madam Sarita would be the wiser."

"Why Mrs. Deering?" asked the doctor, quickly.

"Merely to save her an additional uneasiness, since I cannot explain my reasons for this exploration just yet—at least, to *her*."

He mused a moment, and then arose.

"Come," he said, with a gesture which Ware had already learned to recognise as one of impatience and sudden resolution, "in some way I must keep an eye upon that rear stairway; when I think of it, it's too conveniently near Madam Sarita's door. Let's go in. We can set your door open, and take possession, if we can do no more. She can't reach the mansard unseen, if we occupy these, at any rate. Eh! *by Jove!*"

It was Mrs. Deering's pony carriage, coming rapidly from stableward, that had called forth this exclamation, and, as it drew up at the library entrance, Murtagh hastened his steps.

"I wonder—" he began, and stopped suddenly at sight of Brenda Deering emerging bonneted, gloved, and alone. She saw them at once and waited their approach, standing beside the carriage.

"Gentlemen," she said, as they neared her, "I am going into town, and shall be pleased to offer one of you a seat in the phaeton. I leave you to decide which—if either—will honour me."

There was just an instant of hesitation, and then "Uncle Holly" laid a caressing hand upon the doctor's arm. "My friend, this is surely *your* chance!" At this point the caressing hand gave the doctor's arm a quick pressure as it withdrew itself, and the speaker came closer to the carriage. "You see," he said to Brenda, "having heard this young man express a desire, or was it an intention, to visit town to-day, I cannot but yield the prerogative of age under the circumstances; besides," lifting his eyes in a momentary meaning glance toward Brenda, "I feel that *I* would be better off *indoors* for a little while; there seems to be a—a little westerly wind," he turned again toward Ware, and his lips plainly shaped the word "*go*," which his eyes quite as plainly confirmed and emphasised.

Thus assured, and wondering much, though more than willing, Doctor Ware took his place beside Brenda, and the lively ponies, suddenly released by the groom, dashed around the curving drive and away toward Pomfret.

When they were out of the gate, "Uncle Holly," who still stood under the *porte-cochère*, threw a quick glance about him, and sat down upon the nearest step. Taking out his packet of cigarette papers, as if about to resume his smoke, he toyed with it for a moment, and then, loosing a tiny pencil which hung pendent from his old-fashioned watch-guard, he wrote a few words upon one of the little papers, and, still holding the packet, but replacing the little pencil, he remained for some moments sitting as at first, and seeming to keep his attention equally divided between the windows of the laundry, somewhat to his

right, and that portion of the paddock—straight ahead of him almost—where Val Rodney, and Brook, and Bruce Deering still lingered.

Black Diana had been put through her paces, and the groom had thrown a bright blanket across the saddle, allowing it to "flap and swing," so Valentine declared, "as no riding dress of the period possibly could or did outside of a circus;" and then the question of riding had been broached by Brook.

"She's a splendid animal!" he declared with enthusiasm; "and only a little is needed to make her a superb lady's horse. Were you thinking of trying her, Cousin Val?" turning toward her with one of his slow, gentle smiles.

Val seemed to hesitate, and then said, very mildly—for Val, "A little."

"Good! Then she shall be set aside for your own exclusive use! Meantime *I* must find a mount as good. When will you take your first ride, coz? You will let me be your groom? Eh?"

He was standing close beside her, and between her and Bruce, who stood with face coldly set and half-averted. Val looked at him, and a flush mounted to her forehead, but she kept her eyes upon his stern profile, and spoke out bravely:

"I don't think you would make a good groom, Brook; as for my first ride upon Diana, whether I ever take it or not, will depend upon Diana's *master!*"

"Her—master?"

And now, Bruce Deering's face was first red, then pale, but he turned quickly.

"Thank you!" he said, with his eyes upon her face; but he did not utter the "Cousin Valentine" which fell so easily from Brook's lips. "Diana is *always* at your service, as you must know. Brook, you are so much a stranger yet, you did not know that the horse is mine. That need not prevent your accompanying Valentine, however; as for *me*, I can hardly presume to offer myself as a lady's escort, *now*." And his eyes sought Val's with a look of pleading. "Not even as her groom," he added, and again turned away.

In the moment of silence following these words, the groom having thrown aside the blanket, led the horse nearer the paddock fence, and Brook going close to the handsome animal, leaned across to fondle its head, and peer into the champing mouth. Then Bruce came a step nearer, and, trying to speak in his usual tone, asked:

"When shall I have her saddled for you, Valentine? Brook, I think, is quite able to do escort duty now."

But the girl's self-restraint was at an end. And she turned upon him with flashing eyes.

"Not at all!" she said in low tones that trembled in spite of her effort for self-control. "Since there must be a substitute for the *master*, there must be a substitute for the *horse!*"

When Brook, after a few words with the groom, turned back to the others with a comment upon his lips, he found Bruce standing alone, watching, with a curious look in his eyes, the figure of Valentine, already half-way to the steps, where Uncle Holly, seeing her advance, was just rising to meet her.

While they yet stood gazing after her, they saw, as she approached him, that "Uncle Holly's" packet of cigarette papers slipped from his hands to the ground; they saw him stoop slowly and awkwardly, while Valentine, bending with a quick darting movement, caught the papers, which were almost at her feet, and, holding them out to him, seemed to claim one as her reward, holding it in her hand and carelessly twisting it, as she exchanged what seemed to be a few light words with the "old man," as Brook was fond of calling him. But they heard nothing; and this is what really happened.

When Valentine saw "Uncle Holly" rise from the steps of the *porte-cochère*, as she came down the gravelled walk, she was in no mood for conversation of the ordinary sort; but, between herself and the detective was already established a system of signals, not voluminous, but sufficient; and when he got up with his amiable smile, and his cheery "Ah, Miss Rodney!" and took his first step toward her, she knew it for an order to halt; and she did not need his swift glance downward at the papers, held so carelessly in his hand, to tell her, when they came the next instant flying to her feet, that they contained a message for her. They were too near the windows of the dining-room and laundry, and the open door, just behind them, beyond the portiere, to risk conversation; but she found it easy enough to untwist the bit of paper in her fingers, and to decipher its contents, while they spoke carelessly of the beauty of the morning, and the charms of June, and this is what she read:

"*Sarita in laundry. Can you manage to keep her downstairs, or outside for half an hour?*

"*Can you send away your maid to-morrow?*"

They had chatted for perhaps five minutes, and "Uncle Holly" had seated himself again upon the lower step, and gallantly offered her a place beside him, while he rolled a second cigarette, when she said:

"It is too pleasant for anything but loitering; but I must find Madam Sarita, I have a favour to beg of her. Besides," turning toward the laundry as the cousins came toward them from the paddock, "my maid is going away this evening quite unexpectedly."

It had not taken Valentine Rodney long to discover that, for some reason, Sarita was anxious to find favour in her eyes, and she did not doubt her ability to manage the woman; as for her maid, she had spoken only the truth. Upon her return from that first drive with "Uncle Holly," Valentine had sent for her maid, who was a faithful, sensible woman of thirty, and had said to her, in the seclusion of her own dressing-room:

"Lotty, I am going to give you that little holiday we have several times talked of, but never quite agreed upon."

"I am sure that was my own fault, Miss Valentine," Lotty had replied.

"Perhaps; but now we are going to agree. Now, Lotty, I am going to be quite frank with you. And what I say must not be spoken of about the house. Oh, yes, I *know* I can *trust* you, Lotty! The truth is I want to take a woman in your place who is not—not exactly an expert, you know. It is to oblige a—a friend, and is really something that I feel I *ought* to do! You know a woman *can't* get a good

place without a character from someone. And I will take this woman and keep her long enough to enable me to recommend her; for I am assured that she can fill the place acceptably. I sha'n't stop your wages, and you are to come back *soon*. The woman is most deserving, and I feel quite interested in her, on my friend's account. You can go to-morrow if you like, Lotty. And you may have that grey china silk, and the bonnet that goes with it, to travel in. My friend says the woman is ready to come, and is most anxious for me to try her."

And Lotty, who would never have left her mistress without a maid for the gayest of holidays, prepared to set out with pleasurable anticipations, and only now and then a tiny jealous twinge as she thought how, perhaps, this unseen new maid might usurp her place in the affections of her pretty mistress.

And while Lotty was hastily letting out the seams of the grey gown to suit her own plump figure, and Valentine, in the work-room next the laundry, was claiming the time and attention of Sarita, Murtagh was rummaging in the mansard to some purpose.

CHAPTER XLII.

SARITA'S CASE.

WHEN "Uncle Holly" reached the west hall and looked about him, he breathed an actual sigh of relief and satisfaction upon finding the place given over to silence and the light breezes that came in through the open windows, and he lost no time in hurrying to his room, where he thrust into his pockets such articles as he fancied he might need while engaged in his search after "rats." In an outer pocket he thrust a wicked-looking steel trap, with its slender chain dangling just in sight. While in another, and inner pocket, securely hidden, he put a bunch of skeleton keys, and so equipped, and with a tiny dark lantern—such as is only known to those of his profession, and one other—concealed beneath his coat, he sped up the stairway regardless of "Uncle Holly's" rheumatism.

At the head of the stairs, as he had expected, was a door, which he opened without resorting to his keys, and when he had closed it behind him he found himself in a long, low room, not too well lighted, and filled with the odds and ends that accumulate in attics of high degree during years of good living, renewals, breakage, rents, and wear and tear. This attic belonged to the older portion of Beechwood, and, as he looked around him, he said to himself:

"This covers my rooms, the doctor's, and Deering's. Umph!"

He made a tour of the place, stepping carefully; stooping down, now and then, to examine the floor, and coming to a halt at a door in the inner wall or partition. It was midway between the door of entrance and the front of the long attic, and he saw, at once, that it must open upon the newer part of the house. But here he found use for his skeleton keys, for the door was locked, and the key nowhere visible.

The light was dim in this quarter, and he took out his little lantern and struck a light, by which he examined the door and its lock, for some seconds ; also the floor and walls near it. He was some moments in finding the key which would unlock the door, but when it was done the hinges worked noiselessly, opening and closing as easily as the door of a drawing-room.

A little to his surprise, he found three or four steps before him, and then he remembered that the newer chambers of Beechwood, as well as the walls of the lower rooms, were very high. There was more light in this part of the attic, and less debris ; several huge trunks, a number of packing-cases, and a quantity of furniture, partly worn, and all of it, covered with canvas or other dust protectors, was placed in orderly fashion, near the central part of the long room, all of it standing free from walls and windows, only a few of which were shuttered, and there was little else.

At the front, where the mansard jutted out over the vestibule, a small alcove was formed, and the double window in the centre let in a long, broad ray of light through a half-curtained sash. "Uncle Holly" went towards it with the quick, cat-like steps of a professional burglar, and when he had reached a point opposite the window, and almost within the alcove, he stopped short, and uttered a single word in a sibilant whisper:

"*Eureka!*"

. . . . . .

"Well—what can I do to oblige you?"

It was Doctor Ware who thus spoke. He was sitting in the small but snug little room set apart to the use of Mrs. Deering's housekeeper, and borrowed, for the time, by Sarita, that she might hold an interview, undisturbed, and as secret as might be, with Doctor Ware.

He had returned from his drive with Brenda just in time for luncheon, and, during that meal, had been obliged to sit opposite "Uncle Holly," and, in spite of his outward self-control, to feel both curious and exasperated. Curious because he felt sure that something had occurred of more than momentary importance, and exasperated to see how suave and amiable was his *vis-à-vis*. How slowly and indifferently he made his way through the *menu*, and how serenely he allowed Brook Deering to fasten himself upon him for a promenade in the grounds, each with his tiny cigarette, and "Uncle Holly" earnestly arguing the advantage of preparing one's own, against Brook's declaration that the advantage of choosing and using one's favourite tobacco could not compensate for the labour of shaping and rolling the little cylinders.

"It's like snuff!" he declared. "The worst of taking it is, that one must dabble in the brown stuff with the fingers," and "Uncle Holly" argued the point "as if he had no other interest in life," thought the doctor, turning away from the open door, from which he had watched the two go toward the terrace.

And then he had encountered Sarita, who had proffered, most respectfully, her request that he would give her a few moments,—"If she might dare ask so great a favour!"—that she might speak with him about her own health.

Wondering somewhat, but quite willing to hear her, more because of the detective's interest in her than because he saw any symptoms of serious illness in the little brown face, and small alert figure, he followed her to the housekeeper's sanctum, and seated himself with his back to the window; and, having closed the door carefully, she turned, and, after a moment's hesitation, took a low seat opposite him and facing the light.

"What can I do to oblige you?"

He had put the question in his best professional tone, and he was a trifle disgusted with himself to find that without in the least wishing or willing it, he had let his mind take on an attitude of antagonism. Of course the reason was not far to seek. He had been influenced, unconsciously, by the detective; and he gave himself a vigorous mental shake, and tried to force his mind into a more reasonable attitude, with the outward result of a relaxed countenance, and a manner so exceedingly affable that the patient, who at first had seemed to hesitate, and was about to plunge into a running prelude of deprecation and excuse, took heart of grace, and plunged at once into the thick of the business, and Doctor Ware found himself listening with a growing personal interest.

She was sorry, more sorry than she could say, to have to trouble him, to trouble anyone with such an ailment as hers; but she owed it to others, even more than to herself, to try and find help for a trouble that was very old, and which, she had hoped, had ceased to trouble her. But she knew now that it was a false hope; and when Mrs. Deering had spoken to Mrs. Merton, in her hearing, about the way in which that kind, good Mr. Holly had been annoyed, by what he supposed to be *rats*, she saw, clearly enough, what she must do. For it was *she* who had disturbed Mr. Holly, and not the rats at all; and it was likely, unless something could be done, to occur again.

Just here the doctor experienced a slight return of the sceptical sensation.

"Do you mean," he asked, "that *you* are likely to disturb Mr. Holly more, even, than the rats did?"

"More! that is it! If I could but tell! It was *I* who kept that good man awake! And, try as I may to prevent it, I may do so again!"

"You mean you may be wakeful and inclined to sit up? to occupy yourself?"

"Ah! to be wakeful! If it were that only, one might be wakeful and yet be still! But I—ah—if I could know! If I could wake at the *right time!*" and Sarita wrung her hands and looked at him appealingly.

The doctor made a sudden, forward movement, and looked at her keenly.

"Do you mean," he exclaimed, sharply, "that you *walk in your sleep?*"

"Ah, see! You have indeed guessed it. Yes! Once, for a long time, I did that, and then it went away, and I thought I was cured, that it had left me! But see, for years I have not been troubled,

except for once, two years ago or more; and then it was only for a little while."

"I see." The doctor's face had taken on its professional mark; and his voice was now soothingly sympathetic, as he asked:

"Does Mrs. Deering know of this?"

"*Mon Dieu!* No one knows it in this house, except Mrs. Merton; and when I found the old spell coming back, I threw myself upon her compassion, and it chanced that she knew the malady. She had seen it among her own people, and she helped me, and was most kind. And now—"

"In what way did she help you?" he broke in.

"Why, you see, when I found the spell working again, and would find myself, waking suddenly, standing in the middle of my room, or, perhaps, at the window; I found that I might leave my room and frighten someone very much, and so Mrs. Merton, very kindly, would always, the last thing at night, come to my door; I would put my key on the outside, and she would turn it so, and lock me in. And sometimes, oh, just once or twice, I waked myself trying to open my door—to get out."

"I see," musingly. "And have you had more than this one attack? the one, I mean, which disturbed Mr. Holly?"

"Yes—yes! That was the third; really the others were—not much. I was so soon wakened."

"And—you will ask Mrs. Merton to take charge of your keys again?"

"I have already done that, doctor," eagerly; "can you help me? Anything! Give me something to make me sleep too soundly to leave my bed—*anything!*"

He smiled.

"There might be danger in that," he said; "but we will see what we can do. I will write you a prescription, and you must use it with care, not to take overdoses. And now I must ask you some questions, in order to get at the cause of this trouble, if possible."

"Y—es!" She looked, he thought, a trifle uneasy.

"Have you inherited somnambulism?"

"Have—I—"

"Was this trouble in your family? is it inherited?"

"*Oui!* Yes! oh *yes!* My—my father before me was the same."

"I see. And these attacks, how long have they troubled you?"

"Always—that is—not *often*—but, now and then, ever since I can remember."

"And they were likely to occur, of course, when something had happened; something to excite you or stir you a little—naturally?"

"Naturally?" she hesitated, and a wrinkle formed between her brows. "Oh, I think it may have been when I was more weary, or, perhaps, not quite *well*—that is all."

"That is all, eh?" He spoke like one who has exhausted a subject, and who drops it willingly. "Now, do you recall the number of those attacks—those of two or more years ago? How many were there? and how long did they last?"

"Oh, there were several! Almost every night for—for three weeks

or more—they came, and always Mrs. Merton shut me in. Then they seemed to leave me."

"Yes. And *before* that? how long had you been free from these attacks?"

"Why, some years—I forget exactly. Four or five years, I think."

"And those—how long did they trouble you?"

"Oh!—about the same time, I think."

"And what caused them, *then?* Six or seven years that must have been."

"*Then?*"—a look that only fell a little short of sullenness crossed her face, and she tapped her gaitered foot upon the floor. "Oh, nothing that I can remember now. Or, yes. I recall there *was* a little attack just before—indigestion, Mrs. Merton called it."

"Was Mrs. Merton here so long ago?"

"Indeed, yes! Next to myself, Mrs. Merton has been here longest of any."

"And Mrs. Deering has never heard of these attacks, you tell me?"

"Never! At first she was not here. Then I did not like to trouble her—and—I felt—sensitive. And now—now do you not—do you not think there is unpleasantness enough—for her?"

"You are quite right." He got up quickly, and, after a few more questions, perfunctorily put, he turned towards the door.

"I will give you a prescription," he said again, "which you must begin with at once." And he was about to leave the room.

"Doctor!" Something in her voice caused him to stop and look at her keenly. He was sure that she was making an effort to speak with less eagerness or anxiety than she felt; and he could see the blood recede from her dark face and come slowly back again as she went on to say:

"Doctor, may I ask—just one question? It is not so strange when you think how long I have been in this family—and that I took care of him since he was a little lad! May I ask—will you tell me something about Master Brook Deering? Do you think he is *really* mending? Is there any danger in his—his malady? Is there—"

She stopped short, with a wild look in her eyes—a look of appeal and anxiety; a look that checked the words upon his lips, and caused him to stand staring into vacancy like one who seeks to grasp at something elusive—something escaping him. And this was indeed the truth concerning him. Standing there, at the moment, he was striving to hide a shock, sudden, strange, and second only to that which almost overwhelmed him at the moment when he had discovered the hand of the poisoner in the death of the master of Beechwood.

It was over in a moment—at least the outward signs of it. But he did not reply to her at once. When he did, it was slowly, like one weighing his words, and in a tone almost confidential.

"I am sure it is quite natural that you should be anxious about young Mr. Deering. I have understood that you were his nurse years ago, and perhaps you could tell me something about his childish ailments—something that would aid me to comprehend his case. I am glad you have spoken of this. I will say to you now that there is

something a little *peculiar* about his case. Had he always a very nervous temperament?"

"Nervous? Yes, at times; not *always*, and not—not cross or fretful, not like that *at all*."

"Was he strong as a child?"

"*Strong?* He was not often *ill*. But rugged—big, like Mr.—like his cousin; no." She hesitated, and then asked, eagerly, "You don't think—it will be serious?"

"Oh, I hope not. I hope not. But we will talk together again. To-morrow, perhaps, when I shall want to hear how you have passed the night."

He got away from her without more words. He wanted to gain his room, and to think. He also wanted to see Mrs. Merton, as privately as possible, and as soon.

CHAPTER XLIII.

MURTAGH'S THEORY.

THE evening of the day which witnessed Murtagh's exploration of the attic, Doctor Ware's professional interview with Sarita, and the departure of Valentine's maid, saw the family of Beechwood all assembled in the drawing-room after dinner.

There was a long call from Mr. Baird and John Redding, and while they were claiming the attention of the others, "Uncle Holly" found opportunity to exchange a few words with Valentine.

"Did your maid really go?"

"Yes."

"And you are quite ready for the substitute?"

"Quite ready. Is she here?"

"She will arrive to-morrow. Has Mrs. Deering been informed?"

"Yes. She sees nothing strange in Lotty's desire for a holiday, and is too preoccupied to think twice about the new maid whom I am taking 'upon trial.'" She paused a moment, while Doctor Ware, crossing the room to join the group at the farther end, passed near them, and fluttered the leaves of a book of prints which the detective had brought to her as a pretext for seating himself at her side upon a low divan.

"Have you any instructions to give me?" she asked when Ware had passed.

"None. The woman understands her *rôle* perfectly. Treat her precisely as you would any other maid. Stop—there is one thing which you can do, if you will."

"What is that?"

"Simply that you speak of your new maid to Judith—is not that her name?"

"Judith is Mrs. Deering's maid."

"Then say to Judith that she will oblige *you* by being a little kind to Rosa—that is the new maid's name—and by helping her with advice at need."

"That will be easy," said Valentine. "Judith is my very good friend—but,"—she stopped, and a flash came into her dark eyes. "You must assure me of *one* thing," she said, with sudden firmness.

"What thing?" smiling a little.

"Can you assure me that, through me or this new maid, no harm will come to Mrs. Deering?"

"I can! Neither through *you*, the new maid, nor *myself*—now *or at any time.*"

"*Thank* you!" She turned her face a trifle more away from those beyond, and toward him. "Can you tell me anything more?" she whispered.

"About—"

"About—the *other* case?" She bent her head and began to turn the pages of the book of prints.

"Yes, we are progressing—a little."

The group about Mrs. Deering was breaking up; Mr. Baird was about to take leave, and there was no further opportunity for speech between them until they were about to separate for the night. Then he whispered while wishing her good-night:

"She will drive over from Rosedale with a letter to you from a Mrs. Berrian."

This was not the only clandestine last word "Uncle Holly" had contrived to let drop. He had leaned over the doctor's shoulder, in passing his chair, long enough to say below his breath:

"*My room to-night—after twelve.*"

Ware's reply had been an almost imperceptible nod, and he went to his room a little later, feeling like a man who has yet much to do.

He had not exchanged one word in private with "Uncle Holly" since his return from his morning drive with Mrs. Deering; and he was wondering much as to the result of the search in the attic. But he had more than this to think of. And he went to do a little interviewing on his own account before the hour for his talk with the detective.

It was eleven o'clock when he entered his own room, and half an hour later when he opened his door again, he found the west hall quiet and in semi-darkness. Some paces beyond his door a single lamp, turned low by some careful hand, was burning dimly, and the dusk about his door emboldened him to set it ajar a scant half inch; next he turned his own lamp very low and placed it behind a threefold table screen; this done, he drew a chair near his door and settled himself to wait.

He had much to think of, and the time did not seem long before he heard a faint rustle in the hall, and peering out saw, what he had been waiting for, a tall form gliding past his door and toward the rear end of the hall. A moment later, standing at his door, he heard the sound of a key softly turned in a lock, and then he went swiftly to his table, turned up his lamp, and, leaving his door wide open, stepped boldly out, moving noiselessly upon slippered feet.

"Mrs. Merton, may I have a word with you?"

"Ah!" The housekeeper, leaving Sarita's door, after turning the key in the lock, had hastened her steps to go to her own rest, after this

late waiting in order to protect Sarita against herself—and she now stood before Doctor Felix surprised, but by no means alarmed, by his sudden appearance. Mrs. Merton was a woman of practical sense, and with "no nerves, nor nonsense about her," and upon hearing his request she wasted no words, but bidding him follow her, conducted him downstairs, through the dimly lighted halls and into her own sanctum, where, in the morning, he had listened to the confession of the somnambulist.

In the fewest possible words he made known his errand, and finished by saying:

"Of course you must see that one cannot treat such a case without a very exact knowledge of previous condition; and I did not think it best to ask too many questions of the patient. It is not wise, in such cases, to let the patient see how serious the matter *may* be. If I can get my information from *you*—it will be much better not to arouse the memory, or excite nerves, already somewhat strained, by questioning Madam Sarita too closely. Then—too—a nervous patient is apt to exaggerate symptoms. Will you tell me—now—about your first know ledge of these attacks?"

Mrs. Merton, who had been standing very straight before him, seated herself, and crossed her hands upon her black silk apron.

"Sarita was here," she began, "when I came back to take charge, after Mr. Deering's return from abroad. *I* had been in the family *before*, but when he came back I was taking care of an invalid sister, and I did not come back to Beechwood until after her death."

"Your sister's death?"

"Yes. The woman who had been in charge happened to leave at about that time. I was told that she and Sarita could not agree, and that she left because they would not send Sarita away. But I never inquired into the rights of the matter—it did not concern me to do so, and *I* found no reason to complain of Sarita; she became a help to me in many ways. Now, Doctor Ware, will you say just what it *is* that you want me to tell you?"

"I want to know the symptoms of those first attacks. How often they came; how long they lasted, and if, in your opinion, or to your knowledge, there was any *cause* for them? If they were brought on by any trouble—excitement—bad news—anything of that sort?"

"I see," said the housekeeper, thoughtfully. "I suppose you are thinking it strange that I am the only one in the house who has known about these sleep-walking spells; but, you see, when the *first* one came on, at least the first known to *me*, there was no mistress at Beechwood; I was alone in charge, and Sarita so dreaded that Mr. Deering should know of these attacks. You see she came here as Mr. Brook's nurse, and she had still the full care of the lad, for he was a lad then."

"At about what age was he?" asked the doctor, casually.

"At the time of her *first* attack? Why, that was *ten* years ago, and he must have been nearly fourteen, for he was about to go away, for the first time, to school, he and his cousin. Up to that time they had always had a tutor since they grew too big for the governor."

"And it was shortly after the young men went away, then, that this first attack appeared?"

"No. It was before—now that I *think*, it must have been *very near* the time of their going. I remember that I fancied, a little, that Sarita, between working hard to get Mr. Brook ready—for she made many of his finer clothes, she preferred to do it, until he was quite a big boy and would not allow it any longer,—and fretting, had brought it upon herself."

"You thought, then, that she had overworked—?"

"Worked and *worried*. Sarita had cared for Master Brook from his infancy, and was much attached to him. *I* thought she dreaded to part with him, but when I said as much to her she was almost angry at me, and said it was the return of an old trouble."

"I see!" Doctor Ware had meant to cut this late interview as short as possible. But he found his interest growing, and Mrs. Merton an intelligent and willing narrator. When at last he closed his catechism and returned to his own room, having first cautioned Mrs. Merton to maintain a discreet silence upon the subject of this interview, he found that it was far past twelve o'clock. He had made an ally of Mrs. Merton, of this he felt assured, and almost his last words to her had been:

"I am glad that Madam Sarita came to you in her dilemma, and I hope we can control this nocturnal restlessness, so that Mrs. Deering need not be disturbed by hearing of it. The task of locking her door every night, if it has to be long-continued, may become a burden to *you*, Mrs. Merton, and in that case, I will try and relieve you. I trust, however, that this new outbreak may be soon checked." And then he had thanked her cordially, and in a way to quite win the allegiance of the good-hearted, practical, and honest soul.

"He's a nice, kind, sociable gentleman," the housekeeper declared to herself, when she had watched him go down the dim hall, and up the stairs to the west wing, "and Sarita may thank her stars that I *insisted* on her seeing a doctor. It's of no use, I *couldn't* have stood the responsibility *alone*. And *I can't see* why she *held out against it so!*"

Murtagh was sitting beside his table with its dimly-burning and well-shaded lamp, and awaiting the doctor's arrival with growing impatience, when at last he came with cautious movement and ghostly tread around the corner and into the dusky room.

The curtains were tightly drawn, and the place was sultry in consequence, but Ware closed and locked the door; and then, when Murtagh had turned up the light, the two men looked at each other. Both faces were alert and eager, and there was a gleam of suppressed excitement in the eyes of each. They sat down close together beside the little table, and the doctor made his brief explanation.

"I was detained; Mrs. Merton made a very late visit to our hall to-night. I will give you the details later—when I have heard the adventures of the attic." Both men spoke just above a whisper, and they wasted few words, knowing the value of time and the risk they ran. "Did you succeed?" finished Ware.

"*Did* I?" Murtagh's eyes shot out one flashing glance, and he laid an open palm with strong pressure upon his visitor's knee. "Man, I have got my hand *upon the throat of a double mystery!*"

"Good!" Ware leaned eagerly toward him. "Is it for my ears?"

"Assuredly." The detective put up his hand and turned down the light once more. "We can use that later," he said, and then, with slow emphasis, "You remember my visit to the church?"

"Of course."

"And what I brought away?"

"Yes."

"Now listen. Do you know that at the time of the Matchin murder, and for two weeks before it, *this house* had stood comparatively empty? First went the master and mistress and Miss Rodney, with their servants—see?"

"Yes," wonderingly.

"A few days later, Mr. Bruce Deering, who at that time was a resident here, overheard an interview between Madam Sarita and one of the others who remained, to the effect that if he—Deering—were not there to be catered for, the servants might *all* have a holiday,—*see?*"

"Yes—yes."

"Upon which Deering obligingly betakes himself to down-town quarters, leaving the servants in possession. Next the housekeeper, good soul, goes away for a rest. Next one maid and then another, until finally, at the time of the murder, Sarita has possession of the house, with only the gardener here, who sleeps at home, and the two men who sleep at the stables. There is a maid, whose family live across the field, and *she* is retained, in seeming; but really is permitted to go home, and makes only an occasional short visit to Sarita."

"Well?" said the doctor, when the other had been silent for a long moment.

"Well—that's all—of that. Now I am going to begin at the beginning. And the beginning is—*Joe Matchin's murder.*"

Ware started, but the detective hurried on, speaking now in rapid, jerky undertones.

"When I had looked over the ground, and heard the stories of the different witnesses, I began to construct a theory, having no sort of proof; and I began with the proposition that Bruce Deering's tale is true, and that, just before he found Matchin in his death struggle, some one *had* rushed away from that bank in search of shelter. And then I asked myself *where* did he go? where *could* he go? easiest, and with greatest assurance of safety? Without a doubt he went *east*, everything *west* of the bank was open, so to speak; nothing there to screen a fleeing man! I studied hard upon this point, and when I found how quickly the search was organised, how thorough it was, and how unsuccessful, I said to myself, the murderer never ran *far!* He went into instant hiding—in some place *very near.* Now *where* was the nearest and safest place?"

"Good heavens! You don't mean—Miss Wardell's house?"

"Better yet; right across the way, big, empty, densely-shaded, was *St. Mark's Church.*"

"Gad!"

"But, to hide in St. Mark's, he must have had an accomplice—after the fact, if not before! I began to look for the accomplice. I

asked myself, Was there anyone near the place that night who might have aided the murderer? Now, remember, in looking over the ground, the bank and its surroundings, I can't help seeing that it would have been very easy for one to hide in the church or in the Wardell house; both were close at hand; both in dense shadow; and —there was *no other place near* or possible! If Bruce Deering *was* on the spot to grapple with the fleeing assassin, and if the others joined him less than five minutes later, as we have been told, the fugitive *could not* have found shelter in *any* of the farther houses upon the bank block *in time*. Now, while I was reasoning in this fashion, with my mind made up to learn more of that big house so close to the church, Wells told the story of his encounter with Miss Wardell. At midnight, while Matchin is being slain, that young lady is sitting reading alone in her library, facing the bank. A little later, after the alarm of the bell, and the gathering of a crowd at the bank, Wells, in passing the house, sees Miss Wardell. He has a lantern, and she is plainly visible. The story of the encounter, as Wells told it, was enough to arouse suspicion in *any* mind, but no one seemed to notice its strangeness, *because* it was *Miss Wardell*."

"What *was* his story—Wells, I mean?"

"Why, that passing her place he sees her by the light of his lantern; she is near a small arbour that is midway between the rear end of the house and the low wire fence that separates the place from the church grounds. There is only a little strip of ground, six feet perhaps, between that fence and the rear wall of the church; and, at the corner of the Wardell lot, and shaded by the great trees, is the rear entrance. Miss Wardell inquired into the cause of the disturbance, and, being told, she tells Wells how she had heard someone running past not long before, and, soon afterward, the sound of horses' feet on the avenue;—*you* don't see anything very suspicious in all this, I daresay—but, remember, it is *my* business to look *everywhere* for possible clues or proofs."

"Of course."

"And, almost at the moment before the inquiry or inquest was over, something *else* came in my way; Miss Wardell's carriage passed the bank and drove out of town; she, thereby, avoiding the chance of being called in as a late witness, after Wells had told his story. I took pains to find out where she drove, afterward; and where do you think she went?"

"I can't imagine!"

"She came *here*. The family were gone; everyone was away but Madam Sarita; but Miss W—— drove to *Beechwood*, sat in her carriage and chatted a few moments with Sarita, and drove away. Now, I gave no thought, at the time, to her visit here, but when I learned that she had finished her drive by calling at the coroner's house, where she had a few pleasant words with the coroner and sheriff, I said to myself, It *may* mean nothing, but I've *got* to believe that assassin was hidden, *almost* on the premises, *or* I've got to believe that Bruce Deering knows more than he has told."

"And—do you think *that?*

"We won't go into that just now. I want to get through with Miss

Wardell. If I had seen any other shadow of a clue I might not have given so much thought to a very small matter; especially when I had learned what a prominent and proper personage the lady was; but, in fact, we detectives learn, very early in our career, not to be awed by wealth, and that crime thrives well in high places. I was a stranger in Pomfret, with no prejudices and with no predilections. Of course, I began trying to find out all I could about the lady; and about the first thing I learned was that St. Mark's has a fine organ, that Miss Wardell *plays* upon it often, and that *she has a key of the rear door.*"

"Ah!" the doctor actually started.

"Not long after," went on Murtagh, "I chanced to pick up a cub, who was on his way to Beechwood with a telegram. I was figuring, at the time, as a sort of groom for Mr. Baird. I was somewhat interested in Beechwood, because of its connection with the bank; and when, five minutes after the telegram was delivered by the boy, I saw the woman Sarita—I did not know who she was then—rush out from the house to the stables, I lingered until I saw a horse and covered buggy come out from the gate, with Sarita driving. Half-way to town Miss Wardell came dashing up on a splendid roan, and I was *near* enough to see the meeting. The buggy was going at a lively pace, and so was the horsewoman. They pulled up short, and I saw a note pass from the lady's hand to the Frenchwoman's. The woman turned back without entering town; and Miss Wardell rode on a little distance; then *she* turned townward, overtook the messenger boy, stopped him, gave him some instructions and dashed away. A few minutes later *I* again overtook the boy, and found, no matter how, that two telegrams had been given into his care to be sent to the city."

Murtagh stopped a moment, and seemed to consider. "I won't take time to give you methods," he resumed, "but try and make my facts brief. Of course I began *then* to study Sarita, and at once connected that visit of Miss Wardell's, on the afternoon of the inquest, with this other meeting, for I had made up my mind that the telegram given to Sarita by the boy had started the woman off to see Miss Wardell, and Miss W—— must have been coming with *instructions.* I found out the meaning of the telegram, and there seemed to have been an effort, on the part of Sarita, at least, to keep the Deerings from coming *too soon* to Beechwood."

"Heavens! what a singular state of affairs."

"Very well, in two days the Deerings came, and the third day Miss W—— was suddenly called away from home; she bought a ticket for a small town in the interior, but she *went to New York*, and so did *I.* I'll say no more on that now. I had just discovered that Miss Wardell had paid, at least, *one* midnight, or very late, visit to the grounds of Beechwood, and that *someone* from this house came forth to meet her, when I was requested to drop the case. I won't go into *that* either just now. I complied, and you know how it is that I am here again. Miss Wardell has paid, at least, two visits here by night since the death of Mr. Deering. *One* of them you were a witness of."

Murtagh paused again, but the doctor did not break the silence; he sat gravely alert and intently waited for what would come next.

"My first theory, for I had considered several others and thrown

them aside, had grown considerably before I was ordered to halt, and I was on the point of visiting the church when the end came—the end of the Matchin case—but I made the visit, as you know, later, and there I found in the belfry, and the closet under the belfry and back of the organ, proof that someone had been in hiding in the church, and had been fed there, probably for several days, for the crumbs and fragments of food I found were of different degrees of staleness. The paper, you will remember, was a scrap of a *New York Daily* dated the morning of the day before the murder of Joe Matchin. Now, do you see how I arrange these fragments of a chain of proof?"

"In part, of course. You think the assassin ran from the bank to the church, which I must agree looks probable in the light of your proofs. But *must* it have been by the aid of Miss Wardell that he reached that shelter?"

"How—otherwise?"

"Suppose that he runs across as you have described, and lurks in the shadow of the trees until Deering comes and unlocks the door, might he not have slipped in then in the darkness, and have concealed himself?"

"Yes, if he *knew* Deering would do that thing. If Deering was his accomplice he *might* have furnished food to the hidden man, but it would not have been easy even at night; on the other hand, Miss Wardell played that organ *nearly every day* for two weeks after the murder."

"Ah! I give it up. I see my fallacy. Tell me, how do *you* fill out the breaks in this chain you have begun to weave?"

"I will, so far as I have them filled out. To begin, we are minus a motive, and that's a grievous blank. But *this* is how *I* see it. Our man comes from the city by rail, and over to the east, where the trains cross that high trestle and then swing around the short curve—you have seen the place?"

"Yes."

"And you know they run slowly there; well, we will say he dropped off *there;* it's easy enough to do; and there's a train that comes through at a little before dusk. He drops off there, and he makes the little mistake of stopping at a farm, where a lone widow lives, and getting a drink of milk. Then he lurks about until the hour comes to pay his visit to the bank; or—does he tap at that window where Miss W—— sits alone? We won't decide upon *that,* but if my theory is not *all* myth, or worse, he *does* come out from the bank, after doing old Joe Matchin to death, and demands, compels, or implores, the young lady to help him; I can *see* how he might do it so easily! A quick run across the street, in the shadow of the big trees; a leap over the low fence; a tap at the window—there is shrubbery all about there; a wait in the arbour, perhaps, while she procures the key, and, again, the shrubbery, the low fence, the door under the trees!"

"It's horrible!" shuddered the doctor. "But the rest—Sarita—?"

"Ah, yes! *There's* a big gap to fill! *Who is* the murderer? *what* is he to these women? and *when* is he smuggled *out* of St. Mark's, and *into* the mansard at Beechwood?"

"*What?*"

"Yes. Someone has been hidden in the newer attic! The signs are *more* than enough. There is the old couch where, not long since, someone has slept. There has been food there, and fruit; a pencil, sharpened often, and the *door* has been *kept oiled*, until it opens like the door of my lady's boudoir!—But, best of all, is *this*." He opened a tiny box, turned up the light, and, holding out the box with one hand and the lamp with the other, said: "Look, but don't *touch*."

Lying upon a fluff of soft pink cotton was a tiny crescent, smooth and thin and fine; a fragment of nail carefully pared from somebody's finger.

And now they dropped into eager discussion, wondering comment, and close criticism of each other's views; after which Doctor Ware brought the conversation back to Sarita, and told the story of her somnambulism.

Before he had finished, Murtagh's eyes were gleaming, and when he had told how Mrs. Merton had taken charge of the key of the sleep-walker's door, he caught at the doctor's arm.

"Good!" he sibilated, "*good!* But you *must* relieve her! Relieve her *at once!* Get the *key* and *do not* lock the door! *Be sure you do not lock her in!*"

CHAPTER XLIV.

GHOSTLY FOOTSTEPS.

THE week that followed Murtagh's visit to the mansard, and its attendant discoveries, passed away in comparative quiet. After a few days, Doctor Ware took possession of the key of Sarita's room, Mrs. Merton giving it into his hand with perfect confidence, for was he not only Sarita's physician, but her near neighbour as well; up late at night, and early in the morning.

"Not that it matters so much about the mornings," she had assured Doctor Felix, "for Sarita is always a late riser, and, for a long time, has been her own mistress so far as her hours of rising were concerned. Now I'm up early enough," the good woman had concluded, "but I don't love late hours, and so, when the lights are out below stairs, I go to my own room, and it *is* a bit of a tax to go up and look after Sarita. Not that I'd refuse any more than I did before, if it was necessary, but since you are so willing—"

And the doctor had declared his *more* than willingness; adding that it might happen, should Sarita have a serious visitation of somnambulism, that she would make a violent effort to get out, and for *that* reason, it was best, also, that she be not aware of the change, or the cause of it.

Of course the detective's reason for wishing to give Sarita free right of way for her possible sleep walking was plain enough to Doctor Ware. He hoped that she would pay a visit to the mansard, and so give him some hint or sign, to help him to new conclusions, or

to strengthen and confirm the old. But, though they watched, alternately, early and late, for several nights, nothing came of it, except that regularly at evening Sarita placed her key in Mrs. Merton's hands, that lady passed it on to Doctor Ware, and he, each morning, turned it in the lock and left it sticking there, to be removed by Sarita, who was profuse in her thanks to Mrs. Merton, and she, good soul, confided to her confederate that it made her feel "really guilty," to be receiving thanks for trouble she had not taken.

But one night, at the end of this seemingly profitless week, after an unusually late sitting in the drawing-room, and a long wait for the house to settle into quiet after, the two confidants held a long secret session in Murtagh's room, and separated in the small hours, mutually agreeing to sleep, both of them, until morning. And sleep they did.

For more than a week past Brook Deering had been regularly visible at table, often retiring soon, upon plea of fatigue, but always reappearing when the next summons came.

But, on the morning after this above-mentioned conference, and its following mutual nap, Brook did not appear in the breakfast-room, and Doctor Ware had just risen from the table when William entered, hastily, with a request that he would come at once to his master.

"He's had a *bad* night, sir," said the man anxiously, "and he don't seem like himself hardly, this morning."

Brook was stretched out in a big reclining chair beside the window, wrapped in a dark dressing-gown, and while his face seemed unnaturally white, his eyes and cheeks burned feverishly.

He dismissed the servant, and, asking the doctor to be seated, plunged at once into his subject.

"Doctor, I am glad that I have opened the way for this; for I don't feel as if I *could* go into details, now, not as I feel at present!" He put out his hand in obedience to the doctor's silent gesture, and the latter counted a high pulse, and saw that the excitement was indeed an overmastering one, whatever the cause.

He dropped the wrist gently, and said, with his eyes scanning every symptom: "You have got yourself into a fever, and William says you had a bad night. Is it insomnia?"

"Insomnia! If that were *all!* Doctor, look at me! Do I look rational?"

"Perfectly."

"And to be credited, then?"

"As much as usual. Why not?"

The young man paid no heed to the implication, but went on eagerly—nervously.

"I have told you of those strange sensations, at other times; but—doctor, do you believe in—in the supernatural?"

"That's a large question; the supernatural, in its true meaning, is something above and beyond nature; if you ask me if I doubt everything in nature, or beyond it, which I cannot understand—frankly I *do not.* One man's brain cannot compass the universe."

"Then—do you believe that the dead can return?" he leaned forward eagerly; his eyes widened, and wavered

"I do not know. If the dead still *are*, and remain, as in life, free agents, so called, why should they *not* return—if they would?"

"Ah!" he sank back in his chair, and closed his eyes, and so sitting spoke.

"At least you will not scoff at me nor call me mad! Doctor Ware, last night, between one o'clock and two, or later, I lay in this bed and heard *footsteps* come and go, come and go, slowly, distinctly, up and down; footsteps—*that I recognised.*"

"In this room?" asked the doctor, calmly.

"No. There!" he pointed to the wall facing northward, on the inner side of the room.

"Who occupies the room on the other side?"

"No one now."

"You are sure?"

"It was my father's room. No one has used it since he died."

"But—he did not *die* in that room."

"No. A week or more before he was removed to the south-east room; this was too near the front, Liscom thought, and the other was more secluded."

"Yes."

"Doctor," he lifted himself erect again, and opened his eyes, "what *was it?* for God's sake tell me! I did not *dream* it! I did not imagine it! Can such things be? Or am I losing my reason? I *heard* the footsteps—or—I am going *mad!*"

The doctor spent a long hour with the excited invalid, and left him, at last, somewhat calmer, having swallowed a quieting nerve-healing draught; at the door he met Bruce Deering, and, by a gesture, drew him away, and down to the lower hall.

"My patient, if not aroused, will soon be sleeping," he said, "and sleep just now is his greatest need. Besides, if you will, I should be glad of your company for a little while." He threw open the door of his room, and they entered and sat down opposite each other. It was their first *tête-à-tête*, for, while Bruce had held himself, at all times, since the shadow fell upon him, with quiet, self-respecting dignity, he had avoided any intimacy beyond the social contact of the table, and of the drawing-room for short seasons after dinner. He had felt, from the first, heartily drawn towards the genial and intellectual young physician, and, under other circumstances, would frankly have sought a better acquaintance; as for Doctor Felix, he had wished for some opportunity to come nearer this grave young man, who bore his trial with so much quiet, but genuine dignity.

"You will pardon me, I am sure," the doctor began, meeting the sober, steady, brown eyes with a frank, clear gaze, "for pouncing upon you so unceremoniously—though, on my own part, I am glad of anything that gives me an opportunity to converse with you a little. I have found your cousin in a strange state of mind this morning. I would like to tell you about it, and to ask you a few questions concerning him—if I may."

"Certainly," replied Bruce, gravely.

"And may I tell you of our interview this morning?"

"If it seems to you needful."

"It does. I wish to spare Mrs. Deering anything that I can, and *this* would, I am sure, be most trying to her; at the same time I feel that I *must* know something about your cousin's health and habits in the past."

"I am quite at your service, doctor." It was impossible to meet this frank man in any but a frank, cordial spirit.

"Thank you! Then, first, your cousin's mother, I am told, was an invalid for some time before her death?"

"Yes; even before her marriage, I think; and that lasted less than three years."

"And she was, at times, or at *some time*—insane?"

"So I have been told. Insanity was a family inheritance, upon her side."

"An inheritance! Mr. Deering, you and your cousin grew up side by side. Do you think *he* has inherited his mother's—curse?"

"Her *curse?* You have chosen the right word, doctor. No, I never have seen anything to indicate insanity, or its tendencies, in my cousin."

"Was, or *is* he, like his mother?"

"Not at all. So I have heard my uncle say, years ago. They were both fair; there the resemblance ended."

"Indeed! Was your cousin often ill, in his youth and childhood?"

"Seldom; we were a very healthful pair."

"Or, inclined to be nervous?"

"Nervous?" he paused a moment; "I think, perhaps, he *was;* at least, excitable."

"Do you mean excitable of temper?"

"Oh, no. Brook's temper was always a marvel of equability; it was *I* who flew into the passions; and out of them again."

"Do you mean that, as a lad, he never quarrelled with you?"

"Very seldom; and then it was not in words. In most affairs he yielded with a sort of amiable indifference. But he had a kind of quiet tenacity, when the point seemed worth winning. He never argued, or grew angry; but, somehow," Bruce laughed, as if at some amusing recollection, "he managed to have his way, his full share of the time."

"I see, tenacious in a quiet way. Was he—as a youth, inclined to be superstitious?"

"Well." Bruce threw back his head, and a smile flitted across his face, "Brook, you must know, was something of a woman's boy. He was in the care of a nurse, the woman Sarita, whom you, of course, have seen. She came with him from abroad after my aunt's death, and I think the boy got some of his notions from *her.* He *was* rather full of them, as a lad. Sarita was very much attached to him, and she kept her influence over him long after *I* had repudiated her good offices. She used to rather resent my small mutinies, and I sometimes fancy that she has never quite forgiven me for some of the lessons in rebellion which I tried to instil into Brook."

"Did you succeed?" laughingly.

"Not very well; Sarita's power was too strong."

The doctor sat for a moment seeming to ponder his next question,

and then dashed suddenly into the story of his talk with Brook ; when he had reached the end, Bruce Deering arose, and took a turn or two across the room ; and he seemed both astonished and troubled. Presently he turned and resumed his seat.

"You say he appeared disturbed—excited by this—this fantasy? How did he *look?*"

"Excited and nervous. As if he were much wrought up. His eyes were glassy, almost ; his cheeks crimson, his hands hot, and his pulse abnormally high."

"And he fully believes in these footsteps?"

"I think so. I am sure he does."

Again Deering seemed to be pondering, and finally, with some appearance of hesitation, he asked :

"Have you—studied his case closely, Doctor Ware?"

"Yes, rather."

"And, will you tell me just what you think about it? frankly, and in confidence? I have never thought Brook a delicate fellow, any more than myself. He is of slighter mould, but in spite of that is muscular enough ; and, for all his mild manners, and soft voice, he has never seemed effeminate or indolent. But there's *something* in him, since his return, that I can't account for ; even by the changes, and trouble, he found himself in the midst of almost at once. With all his seeming easiness, and his amiability, I never thought, *or knew* him lacking in pluck, and tenacity ; and yet—*Is it* this strange illness that has robbed him of the very elements he stands most in need of now?"

"I'll try and be frank, Mr. Deering, but I fear I can't enlighten you much ; I'm something of a physiognomist, and I think I can read your cousin's character fairly well. You're quite right in saying that his is *not* a *weak* character,—however, at present, it may seem. Under those easy manners, and slow movements, there is plenty of tenacity. He has the temperament that gathers resentment slowly, but in which it lingers, and grows ; and he is not quite evenly balanced. As to his illness—it is not purely a physical breaking down ; I cannot trace his present condition to physical causes *alone*, nor can I attribute it *all* to his father's sad death. This breakdown had commenced before he arrived at Beechwood ; on the night of the accident I saw that, but, save for a certain amount of fatigue and a slight lameness, I could see *no reason* for it. At this present time he is weaker than when he came, besides being exceedingly nervous, and inclining toward irritability ; but I can trace it to no one physical cause."

"And—do you think—as he seems to fear, that there is danger of even partial or short-lived insanity?"

"There should be none. Inherited insanity is apt to come suddenly and to be hastened by trouble, or calamity ; since it has not yet appeared, I see no reason why it should develop, *now*, when the system has, in part at least, adjusted itself to the circumstances."

Deering sighed heavily.

"I wish it might have been different," he said, slowly. "At first I hoped so much from Brook's home-coming. He should stand between the ladies of this house and much of the trouble still menacing them,

and of which, unhappily, *I* form a part. Great heavens!" he sprang up, his face pale and drawn, and his hands clenched as if he were holding something in fierce restraint. "To *think* that instead of standing as a shield and helper in such a time as this, I am here in this house, only a reminder to them of yet *more* trouble, and that the *worst* is yet to come—and to come through *me;* as if *this* were not enough—and now the son of the house, who should stand beside his father's wife—and ward, and take the helm in such a time as this, will *he* fail them too? Must we have on the heels of humiliation and death —insanity?—or—"

"Mr. Deering!" Doctor Ware came close to him and laid a hand upon his arm. "Remember *I* have not predicted insanity for your cousin! On the contrary, since the worst, the *shock* at least, has passed, and the insanity has not manifested itself, there is little danger —" he paused a moment, and his voice dropped, "unless—"

"Unless—well?"

"Unless some new or *unknown* cause arises—or exists."

"And then—?"

A new note of meaning and interrogation had sounded in both voices, and Deering, who for a few moments had broken through the stern restraint which he had maintained so long and well, stopped, started, turned his face away for a moment, and seemed to command himself with a mighty effort.

"Doctor," he said in a tone which was not quite steady, "will you pardon me this outbreak, and forget—"

"One moment," there was a note of appeal in the doctor's tone and a still stronger appeal in his fine eyes. "Let me say a few words before you have quite shut yourself up in this mantle of dignity and reserve, which, fine and admirable as it is, can not be worn too long with no relaxation without disastrous consequences; there is a limit to *your* strength, and to mine. You have opened your heart for a moment, but I have only seen what I knew must be there:—natural and manly concern for the women who have a right to your care and protection. A month ago you and I were strangers, *now*—I wish we might be friends, in the truest and strongest meaning of the word. I will not offer my credentials—they were given, no doubt, to Lysander Deering weeks ago—otherwise I should hardly be here; but, tell me, if the time and the need come, the time when *they* need a strong arm, and you cannot do what you would, will you trust them to *me?*" he came a step nearer and put out his hand. For a moment Bruce seemed on the point of grasping it, then, suddenly, as he raised his eyes and met the glow, the tender fire in the deep grey orbs on a level with his own, his hand dropped suddenly to his side, and he moved back, paling, and then flushing slowly to his very temples; and so, for a long moment they faced each other.

Then Bruce spoke, seeming to control himself by an effort, and to choose his words—spoke slowly and with a strange huskiness as he went on.

"Doctor Ware, I could not doubt your *honour* if I would! When I found how much my cousin was prostrated after my uncle's death, and that *you* were to remain here as one of the household, I felt it *my*

duty to know all that could be known of you ; and when Mr. Ingram went to New York he was prompt in finding out, and sending to me, assurance that no man or woman could have a truer or better friend than Doctor Felix Ware. A man would be a fool to refuse such friendship ! I have been, and am thankful for it, for myself—and for *them.* But—I am very human—and more selfish than I once thought. And your voice and your eye have told me more than your lips have spoken ! Doctor Ware, can you look in my face and say that, in offering your services, your friendship to me and to them, *it is for no other* reason—for no *stronger reason* than—sympathy, than chivalrous interest in two noble women overwhelmed now with trouble, and threatened—God help me—with more to come ? I—I *cannot* take your hand, until—you answer me ! "

Doctor Ware drew himself soldierly erect, and his grey eyes met the other's squarely.

" And if I say that, behind those other strong and sufficient reasons, there *is another*—stronger—and purely personal ? "

" Then," Bruce folded his arms, and his voice had a dull despondent sound, " while no man to-day stands more in need of one true friend than do I, I must still refuse your hand and your friendship, while I cannot but respect and—yes, *admire* you, and shall try to be still thankful that such a friend has come among us. I am too human, too weak, to be a *friend* to the man who can go straight on and win for himself a happiness from which *I* am shut out ! For—while I know that I have lost all right to hope, and have *given up* hope for *myself*, I *cannot* clasp hands in friendship with the man who will one day, perhaps, win the girl I have loved from her childhood ! Ah, I have not been so blind."

He turned away and would have left the room without another word, but Felix Ware with one quick stride was beside him, between him and the door.

" Deering ! Stop, man ! " he exclaimed, and he caught the fingers outstretched to open the door, with his own strong right hand, and laid the left, firmly but gently, upon his shoulder. " You *have* been *blind*,—blind and deaf !—answer me now—*this* is not the moment for false delicacy ! This girl—the girl you love—is it not Miss Rodney ? "

" Whom else—"

" No matter !—no matter for anything—except this—you are safe to accept my friendship, to take my hand. Miss Rodney is very lovely, very sweet, but she is *not the woman*—the one fair woman for *me !* " and he caught Deering's two hands between his own, and pressed them vigorously.

" But—" began Bruce, " but I don't see—whom—how—"

" Deering ! " the doctor's face became suddenly grave, and his voice solemn, almost reverent. " Let us not speak *now* of the whom or how ! *I* have not the *right* to do so. I may not seek it nor *ask* it for many long months, perhaps never. As long as I can see her or serve her, I must be content and patient, unless," here he smiled, " unless I should find what you thought *you* had found in me—a *rival.* I don't think *I* could shake hands with a rival any more than you could.

Someone tapped at the door and he opened it promptly, thinking and hoping to see "Uncle Holly." But it was Sarita who stood upon the threshold with a troubled face and wide eyes.

"Doctor," she began, without seeming to notice Bruce, "they tell me that my—that Master Brook is ill—*worse!* That he had so very bad a night, and is now wild like—and—"

"Hush, Sarita; not so loud. If William has been talking nonsense below-stairs it must be stopped. Your young master passed a restless night and was somewhat tired this morning and a trifle nervous. There's nothing to be alarmed about, but you must not disturb him; I left him almost asleep."

"Thanks, doctor; *many* thanks," she turned as if to go.

"And how is it with you, Sarita? Did *you* rest well?" he asked.

"Oh, quite well, *very* well, thanks to your good medicine."

"Glad to hear it. Continue its use and don't think of going near Mr. Deering until you hear, through William, that he is awake."

"No, doctor, certainly not," and she turned away, a look of mingled relief and dissatisfaction upon her face.

CHAPTER XLV.

JOHN ROSS REAPPEARS.

"DEERING," said the doctor when he had closed the door upon Sarita, after seeing her enter her own, "you were speaking a moment ago about this woman and her regard for your cousin. Were *you* also much in her care?"

"Not in the way that Brook was. I was quite a lad when I came to Beechwood to live, and the woman who had been to me a sort of nurse and governess in one since I was two years old, came with me; my uncle kept her for nearly two years, and she took full charge of me as Sarita did of Brook, and taught us both, until my uncle thought it time to substitute a tutor. By that time, Mrs. Merton, who was attached to all the Deerings, was in charge here, and *she* looked after my rents and tears, and was kindness itself to me."

"I see; you will not consider me asking idle questions, I hope; was I right just now, in thinking that there was a shade of something almost hostile, in the single-veiled glance Madam Sarita threw at you as she stood at the door?"

Bruce looked his surprise. "Is it possible that you noticed that? Well—Brook being her nursling, and prime favourite, of course she could hardly have been expected to bestow much regard upon me. And there were times, in our harum-scarum days, when I have fancied that Sarita *was* almost jealous of me. Certainly she often accused me of leading her charge into mischief; and no doubt she was right. But she never manifested anything like open hostility, beyond blaming me as the ringleader in our boyish escapades; and, while I always had the feeling, so strong in some of us when there is lack of sympathy or hidden dislike, that I was not popular with Sarita, she has never be-

trayed it in words or acts. On the whole, I cannot blame her. Brook was her nearest interest; she brought him over the ocean, a babe in arms; and he must have a very warm place in her affections—and she has been very good to him, very faithful to her charge, and to the family interests. Of her own choice I do not think she would ever leave Beechwood."

"All the same," said Ware, "she looks with very ill favour upon *you*."

"As to that," smiled Bruce, "she is quite capable of thinking that I am neglecting Brook, and of resenting it. Doctor, I fear you do not like Sarita."

"I! Oh, we are only now becoming acquainted. At present—since a week ago, in fact—she has been my patient," and here for the moment the subject was dropped.

After this interview a very good understanding seemed to exist between Bruce Deering and Doctor Ware, and they were often together in the library, or about the ample grounds; sometimes driving, or strolling here and there round about Beechwood. They were not strictly confidential. Deering's pride and reserve were inborn, and the doctor was held back by his understanding with Murtagh; but they were frankly cordial, they trusted each other, and the way was open, when the need should come, for mutual candour and help.

Meantime the summer days were passing, and the time for the Matchin trial was coming near.

John Redding and his partner were prepared, with every weapon at their command, to defend the accused, and Mr. Ingram had promised to be at hand at the proper time, to add his legal strength to theirs. And this meant much, as all knew who had heard the eloquent, persuasive and keen old lawyer, or watched his progress, and multiplication of legal laurels, through a career of twenty years, or who had heard John Redding's ringing and magnetic periods in the courts, where, in three short years, he had easily gained a foremost place.

It had come to be generally believed by the rational part of Pomfret, that the case of the people against Bruce Deering, for the murder of Joe Matchin, would end in acquittal, or, at the worst, go by default; for, beyond the facts of his presence at the side of the murdered man, a few moments in advance of the others, and the blood stains upon his linen, there was nothing to bring in the way of proof. And while the blood stains seemed serious circumstantial witnesses, still in the utter absence of motive, and in consideration of the young man's high standing, and hitherto blameless character, these alone would hardly be sufficient to make out a case for the prosecution.

At first it had seemed, indeed, that popular opinion, than which nothing is less to be relied upon, had set in full tide against the accused. But the death of Lysander Deering had brought about a sudden change in public sentiment.

For the dead man there had been strong liking and universal respect, and the sympathy for his family, and sorrow over his loss, was sincere and almost unanimous. And when it became known that Lysander Deering's faith in his nephew was perfect; and that he had been ready to stand by him, and defend him, with all his heart, and

with open purse, the fact had its weight; and those who deplored the loss of so good a man, who had believed in him, and in his unerring judgment, for years, felt very lenient towards the nephew, who had been to him like an own son. And the talk about a quarrel, and the flight of Rose Matchin, which had its beginning in the mouths of a few of the loafers and saloon loungers, seemed to have died away.

Nevertheless, Sheriff Carton and the prosecuting attorney—who had been opposed and thwarted in certain political aspirations, a few years previous, by Lysander Deering, and Mr. Baird, and John Redding—were both full of dark sayings, or ominous silences when the name of Bruce Deering was mentioned in their hearing. They were often together in council, and the sheriff had been heard to say, with significant nods, in pantomime of eye and finger, that the defence would find "more than they were looking for," and that he "had not been following such a 'blind lead,' as they seemed to think."

As to the actual state of affairs, these were known only to the few who had gathered in Mrs. Deering's parlour on the night of the reading of Mr. Deering's requests concerning the will.

The last words of Joe Matchin—that seemed to point, with terrible clearness, an accusation against Bruce Deering—these few men, with mutual consent, and in the firm belief that they were aiding rather than hindering the cause of justice, had determined to withhold as their own secret. Heard only by the two young lawyers, who could not be expected to figure as both attorneys and witnesses; and by Bruce, who could not be required to testify against himself; and only retold, and that by Bruce himself, to Messrs. Baird and Arden, this secret they felt sure would remain such.

As for the half-square of linen, with the two implicating initials upon it, that reposed in a secret place known only to Murtagh, and to be used at his discretion, which was sure to manifest itself upon the safe and right side.

There still remained the blood-stained hatchet, and the fact of the stolen money; and, after mature reflection, Redding had agreed with Mr. Baird, that these used in evidence would tell for, rather than against Deering, who could have no motive for robbing a bank in which he was personally interested, and who stood in no need of money.

And last, there was the amethyst button, and—Jonas Wiggins.

The knowledge of the button rested between the two Wiggins, Bruce and Brenda Deering, and Murtagh, and Tom Wells. As for Jonas himself—the thought of Jonas and the button had been troubling the mind of the detective for some time, and the arrival of Rosa, the new maid, upon the scene of inaction, served in some occult way to stimulate his interest and anxiety in the subject.

Rosa Brenner, so the new maid announced herself, was a brisk and business-like seeming personage, somewhat past her youth, and with a face that, while not so good-looking as to render her an object of jealousy among her kind, was yet comely. Her manners were quiet, and so very frank, and evidently good-humoured, that she became at once popular below-stairs.

She was ready to exchange a bright word with, or do some brisk

kindly act, for any and everyone, and yet she was neither obtrusive nor too talkative.

In three days she was on amiable terms with the entire household; and, at the end of the week, she had established an especially social footing between herself and Judith, Sarita, and Mrs. Merton; as for William, that staid bachelor was fairly taken off his feet.

There were two things, simple but sufficient, that drew Sarita and Rosa together: one was embroidery, the other French.

Rosa could embroider like a very daughter of Burano, and Sarita loved dainty embroiderers. And Rosa, who was supposed to be embarking upon the career of lady's-maid, aspired to be a "French maid," if she could only "acquire a little French of the very, *very best* accent, such as *yours*, Madam Sarita," and so the French and the embroidery began simultaneously; Rosa finding ample time, meanwhile, to study the art of the *coiffeuse* with Judith, whose fingers were notably deft in this important feature of a lady's-maid's acquirements.

When Rosa had been about a week at Beechwood, Uncle Holly announced one morning that he had been invited by Mr. Baird to pay with him a visit to his fine stock farm; and, in proof of this, Mr. Baird himself appeared soon, driving Lady Jane, and carried "Uncle Holly" away beaming with satisfaction.

Less than an hour after, Bruce and Doctor Ware, trotting easily along upon Max and Diana, met the pair upon the south turnpike half a mile out of town, and headed toward "Greenlands." But, in spite of this fact, before high noon "Mr. Baird's new man," John Ross, Esq., might have been seen loitering about the rear door of the carriage house, where, as upon a former occasion, he soon admitted a visitor in the shape of Tom Wells.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A SLEEP-WALKER.

WHEN Wells and the quondam John Ross had exchanged greetings, and established themselves in the convenient upper room, still held at the disposal of the detective, this latter personage came promptly to the point.

"Yes, Wells," he said, in reply to the huntsman's greeting, which had been a characteristic mingling of surprise and interrogation. "Yes, I'm here *yet*. I have been here ever since I saw you last; and am likely to be here for some time longer; and I've reached a point where I must have some help from *you*, or be a good deal hindered; and at a very important point in our little game too.—No, I don't use it—*that* way."

Wells, who had taken from his pocket a bar of tobacco, and silently proffered it, at what he recognised as the end of Murtagh's speech, now bit off a comfortable "chew," and replacing it in his pocket, said, with laconic brevity:

"Wal, what's wantin'?"

"I believe you *know*, Wells! I want that amethyst button. It will help me immensely."

Wells crossed one leg over the other, and chewed his weed in silence for a moment. Then he folded his arms and turned himself squarely toward Murtagh.

"Look here, Mr.—John Ross, I ain't doubtin' *you!* I believe you're a square man; *but* you're old business!—an' your business is ter chop ter the line, as they say, an' never mind whar the chips falls. D'ye recollect what I told ye once afore?"

"About the button?"

"Jest so. Wal, I'll tell yer, seein' 'tis *you*, one time more. I ain't goin' ter hand over that button to *anybody*, not so long as there's a chance of its hurtin' *Bruce Deerin'!*"

"But, if he's *guilty?*"

"He *ain't* guilty! no more'n I am!"

"And that's your ultimatum?"

"It's my—no, sir-ee!—termatum! Ye can swear to *that!*"

Murtagh's face drew down to a very sober length.

"But, Wells, don't you know that Wiggins will be likely to tell that button story in court? and he suspects *you* of finding it."

"Oh, yes! I've heard about *that.* And you're right about his tellin' the story in court; he's been cousinin' with the prosecutin' attorney, and old Carton; an' he'll do *his* dirtiest, don't you forget it! However, I guess I kin hold my own with Jone Wiggins *yit!*"

"Wells," the detective lowered his voice persuasively, "this is between you and me! Nobody else knows you have ever seen that button, eh? except Deering, of course."

"Of *course*," assented Wells.

"Well, now,—I'm authorised; just—tell me what you'd rather have than that button?—five hundred?—a thou'?—out with it."

Tom Wells got up with a quick spring that sent the chair he had vacated tumbling backward with a crash.

"Consarn ye!" he cried. "I s'pose you're doin' right enough, from *your* pint of view, but—darn it all! I've a good mind to knock ye down—anyhow!"

"But, Wells, listen!" Murtagh got up and caught him by the arm, "no one would ever be the wiser."

"Shet up, can't ye?" twitching his arm away. "I'm *out* of this business! I ain't the feller you've took me fur, Mr.—and *you* ain't the man I took *you* fur; offerin' *bribes!* It's time for *me* ter be *goin'!*" and he strode toward the stairway.

But a sudden suppressed sound caused him to turn; Murtagh, close at his heels, was shaking with soft laughter, and, in a moment, had the big huntsman in a muscular grip.

"I guess we weren't so *very* much mistaken in each other, Wells," he said, drawing the other back and releasing him, to set right the overturned chair. "The fact is, old fellow, we've made up our minds, Mr. Baird and I, to let you into matters a little deeper; but I could not risk it without trying your mettle—don't you see? Not that either of us felt any great uneasiness or doubt. Sit down again, man!" and Wells

dropped down into his place again, only muttering as he seated himself, in a half aside :

"I swan to man !"

"Now then, Wells," went on the detective, briskly, "time flies, and I must be back at my post soon, and that post happens to be, at present, Beechwood."

"*No !*"

"Yes, sir ! Did you happen to hear that a certain Mr. Holly, distant relative, was a guest up there ?"

"Why—yes."

"Well that's me ; don't look so astonished. Well—Mr. Baird has advised me to take you into full confidence, and I'm only too glad to do it ; and when I am done, I *think* you'll be quite ready to put that button into my keeping, for, Wells," dropping into instant gravity, "I hope it will help us towards finding out *more* than the truth about Joe Matchin. Wells, there's been more than *one* murder committed in Pomfret of late ; and, I believe, upon my soul—that they were *both* committed *by the same hand.* Wells, you will give me your promise of secrecy ? if not of help ?"

"Of secrecy ! so help me ;—of help, too, if it's not against Bruce Deering !"

"I'll tell you what I can, and you must judge for yourself. Wells, that good man, Lysander Deering, did not die of 'heart failure ;' he was *poisoned !*"

And then, while Wells sat beside him, speechless, almost, with the shock and surprise, Murtagh hurriedly related so much of the story as was needful ; omitting, by the way, much personal detail—but telling enough to place the case as clearly before Wells as it was in his own mind.

"So," said Wells, when he had exhausted his surprise, and pondered over the strange recital, "*that* was why you was so interested in St. Mark's, eh ? Great snakes ! but when one comes to think about it, there couldn't a *been* a better hidin' place, nor one half so handy. An' to think, no one ever thought of it but *you !* And—Miss Wardell !—*that's* a purty big pill to swaller !—but—if the church part of the business was true, the rest looks a purty closte fit. Jimmenetty ! suppose the feller was a layin' in that arbour all the time she was talkin' over the fence to me ?"

"Quite likely."

"But—Cracky ! if the *right* man *was* in hidin', in the church first, and up at the big house afterward, *that* lets Bruce Deerin' out, don't it ?"

"I hope so," said the other, evasively.

"But it *does !* And them two women ; *what* does it all mean ? them letters, and messages, and meetin's in the shrubbery, what do you make out of *that ?*"

"Nothing as yet. At the worst Miss Wardell may have had reason to fear Matchin ; these beautiful spirited women sometimes have secrets, and Matchin, so near her, night and day, may have discovered something—"

"Hum—well, she's allers been called a high-flyer !—but that Frenchwoman—!"

"Well, she *is* a Frenchwoman, and they are born intrigueants, so called. Sarita, I have been told, is very fond of money; Miss W—— seems to have known her well; may the one not have been bribed to help the other out? Beechwood was empty, almost; one could hide there, and, when things were quiet, or there was danger of discovery, it would be a good point from which to tramp across the country to some of the neighbouring stations. This is only theory, mind; but the thing's *possible*."

"What *I* want to know is this; do *you* think it *possible* that Bruce Deerin' *had any sort of hand in it?*"

Murtagh looked away, and bit his lip; then he turned back with sudden resolution in his eyes.

"Tom Wells," he said, earnestly, "I believe you're as white a man as God ever made! I *know* I can trust *you*, and I won't ask you to trust *me*, and to give, what you believe to be, a solemn trust into my charge, without a return in kind! I *can't* say that I am *sure* of Deering's innocence, though, by feeling and instinct, I am drawn toward him!—But, Wells, do you remember when I bade you good-bye, and asked you to keep a look-out on Jonas Wiggins? well, I was *leaving for good*, then; or so I thought.—Leaving *by the consent* of Bruce Deering, and *at the request* of his uncle, who told me that there were *reasons why the Deerings must not pursue the case;* and asked me to let it drop, and go away. To leave it—to be worked out by the sheriff."

"Good lord!" Wells fairly groaned. "And—did anyone else—did Baird know?"

"Baird knew, and Arden, and Redding,—they all said that the old man's health was at stake, that they did not understand, but they *trusted* him, and that he must have his will."

"But—you came *back?*"

"At the request of Mr. Baird—and Mrs. Deering—and to look into the poisoning case."

"But—great scott! You *are* working the other—?"

"Yes, I have been retained again."

"By Bruce?"

"No. *For* Bruce—and without his knowledge—by a *friend.* Don't press me *there*, Wells."

"Well I won't! and I won't try to guess either. *For* Bruce, you said?"

"Yes. For him—in his interest to clear him, to *prove* his innocence; nothing less will do. And now—Wells, about that button?"

. . . . . .

An hour before sunset, "Uncle Holly" came back to Beechwood as he left it; sitting, jovial and smiling, beside Mr. Baird, and behind Lady Jane, whose praises he intermingled with eulogies of the stock farm. Throughout the dinner hour, and late that night, in the seclusion of his own room, he examined minutely, and gloated over, the amethyst button, with its tiny, glittering diamond sparks.

He was thus engaged when he heard at his door—before which he, habitually now, kept a tall screen, except when he looked for a late

visit from the doctor—a soft scratching noise, such as might have been produced by a very young and timid mouse.

Opening the door noiselessly, he saw Doctor Ware without, in jacket and list slippers, and by a sign was bidden to come out and follow him.

"She is going up the stairs," he breathed in Murtagh's ear, and the door was softly placed ajar, and the two men moved, in Indian file, and with Indian stealth, toward the stairway leading to the mansard.

The stair was enclosed, and they could see nothing until they had reached the foot; but here they paused and drew back, each with a quick catching of the breath. Half way up the flight, Sarita, in a long, loose gown of some pale grey stuff, was gliding upward, slowly and stealthily, with her head turned as if fearing observation; but her eyes were set and staring, and Doctor Felix knew, upon the instant, that she was, beyond doubt, asleep.

She carried in her hand a common candle, and, when she had reached the top stair, she put it down upon the landing, and again seemed to listen. After a little she put her hand upon the door and tried to open it, and, when it resisted her efforts, she waited a moment, standing with an ear close to the panel. Then, very softly, she rapped, one—two—three raps, soft but distinct, and at least a full half minute apart. There was another moment of waiting, and then, with a sound like a sigh, she turned and seated herself upon the upper stair, pushing her candle back into the darkest corner at the same time.

Then the two watchers exchanged inquiring glances, and withdrew a few steps down the hall.

"Did you know that door was locked?" whispered Murtagh.

"Yes; I asked Mrs. Merton about the keys to-day while you were gone. I told her to lock the attic door, suggesting, as a reason, the tendency of somnambulists to go *aloft*, and expressing a fear that the woman, should she do so, might expose herself to a severe cold in that big garret. Of course, as you very wisely suggested, I prefaced all this by telling her that in order to study her symptoms more closely, I meant to leave her door open some night, and to watch her movements in order the better to understand her case."

"I see; how long will she be likely to stay up there?"

"Depends entirely upon her former habits. Evidently she has waited up there, at some time, until someone chose to admit her; she may sit there an hour or even more. Wait, I'll take a look."

He was back in a moment with his report.

"She is leaning against the wall with her ear toward the panel of the door listening. She'll not move just *yet*."

"Then wait here a moment," whispered Murtagh, and he slipped down the hall and around the corner leading toward the newer wing. In a short time he was back again.

"It's all right," he whispered; "the door is not locked."

Ten minutes passed, then twenty, and then, a few minutes later, the doctor, going to reconnoitre at the foot of the stairway, came hastily back and motioned his companion to stand aside. A moment later Sarita passed them; she was walking slowly and with head a little

advanced as if listening ; she had abandoned her candle, leaving it, as they afterwards found, upon the stairs.

Slowly she made her way toward the front, until she had reached the corner, and here she paused with her face in the direction of the room occupied by the young men of the house, then she turned and went, with a somewhat faster movement, around the corner, down the main hall, and straight on, until she reached the door of the room that had been Lysander Deering's own. Here she paused and went through the pantomime of looking cautiously around, trying the door, and carefully opening it, and all with eyes set and unseeing.

The room, or suite of rooms, which had been Lysander Deering's, had been kept, since his death—indeed, since he was carried tenderly, in strong arms, out of them and into the secluded and airy north-east chamber where his last sigh was drawn—in the most exquisite order, and swept and garnished daily as if the master might at any moment re-enter and take possession again. In the alcove dressing-room the toilet tables bore their accustomed assortment of brushes, combs, flasks, razor cases, and the other various paraphernalia of a gentleman's toilet ; and in the bedroom the curtains were partially drawn, an easy-chair stood in its usual position before the fire-place, with the master's dressing-gown thrown across its back, and a pair of silk-lined slippers upon the hearth, while upon the little stand, drawn close by the bed's head, stood a dainty water set, a night lamp, a bible and prayer-book, both bearing signs of long and familiar use, and in a slender crystal vase close beside them, a cluster of creamy roses newly gathered that morning, and placed there, as was her daily habit, by Brenda Deering.

Into this room went Sarita slowly and as silently as any ghost ; just across the threshold she paused, turned her head from side to side, and then, with quick, long, sliding steps, crossed the alcove and entered there.

Murtagh put his lips to his companion's ear : " We can't see from here," he breathed ; " are we safe to follow her ? "

The doctor nodded, and whispered back : " *Unless* she wakes."

" We must risk it." They glided in through the still open door, and flattened themselves against the wall in a niche just big enough to hold them and formed by a jutting cabinet, and the corner of the room nearest the fire-place, where they could see the interior of the alcove. They had hardly placed themselves when the sleep-walker came out, moving like one no longer suspicious or in doubt.

She came straight to the door of the chamber by which they all had entered, and closed it swiftly and silently. Until then the windows, with their half-opened curtains, and the light kept dimly burning in the hall without, had rendered things barely visible ; but now all was in semi-darkness, and Sarita's grey-clad form, the two windows opposite them, and the bed, standing midway between the windows and the fire-place near them, were the only things which outlined themselves in the gloom. Then they saw the grey figure move, and heard a quick hissing and sputtering sound, not loud but distinct. In a moment a tiny flame shot up, then a subdued light filled the room.

Murtagh caught the doctor's arm in his amazement, and peered into his face inquiringly. Could it be that this woman was *asleep ?*

And now they draw closer into the shadow of their niche, and standing there with bated breath, watched, almost doubting their own senses, a strange pantomime.

Once or twice she made the circuit of the chamber, stopping before one of the windows, and pulling down the blind with a quick jerk. There was no water in the carafe, but she went through the pantomime of pouring out a little, and holding it up to the light—setting it down at last untasted. And now they noted in her movements a certain difference or change, and a singular mixture of hesitancy and sureness. She came to the fire-place next, and they grew almost breathless because of her nearness. Standing beside the easy-chair, she took up the silken dressing-gown, shook it out, and slowly drew it on over the sleeves of the grey robe. Then she moved to the opposite side of the fire-place, and deliberately thrust her feet into the soft slippers, and then for a time she sat in the big chair, half buried in its softness, and seemed to stare at a dream fire and to ponder.

It seemed an hour to the two watchers, really it was less than ten minutes, that she sat quite motionless; then she arose, and crossing her hands behind her, began to walk the floor, crossing the chamber, and traversing the length of the dressing-room. In the sleeping-room proper, the smooth inlaid floor was covered, except for a narrow margin next the walls, with a soft thick rug, but in the dressing-room, and the bath beyond, the polished floor was bare, except where, before the dressing-table, and in front of the low, cushioned window-seat, long, narrow strips of the rich Persian weave were laid.

As the slippered feet passed from the chamber and the soft rug, to the smooth and uncovered floor of the dressing-room, each footstep was distinctly heard, and Doctor Ware started at the sound. But Murtagh's hand was upon his arm, and again they stood and counted their own pulse beats, while the strange promenader passed up and down, confining herself, after a time, to the polished and responsive floor of the alcove, where each step sounded so clearly that they almost feared they would be heard without. After a time the steps became slower, and finally Sarita paused beside a small davenport just inside the alcove and near the window. She passed her hand lightly over its closed top, seemed to hesitate, repeated the movement, and gave a quick pull at the handle of the topmost drawer. Then something seemed to disturb her. She moved away a few steps, paused, seemed to listen; and then, going back to the chair beside the fire-place, pulled off the dressing-gown, letting it fall from her hands to the floor, dropped the slippers from her feet, and going to the door, opened it, and went quickly out, down the hall, and straight to her own room. She had not closed the door of the room she had left, and she did not close her own door, but going straight to her bed laid herself down upon it.

As she crossed the threshold of Mr. Deering's chamber, the two watchers exchanged quick glances, and while Doctor Ware followed her at once, Murtagh lingered long enough to replace the gown and slippers, arrange the window shade as it had been before Sarita drew it down, turn off the light, and draw the door shut as he left the room.

When he rejoined Doctor Ware, that votary of science was watching the now motionless woman from his place at the open door. He had taken possession of the candle Sarita had left in the stairway, and shading its flickering flame with his hand, was watching her by its aid.

As the detective reached his side, Ware placed the candle in his hand, and motioned him to shade it as he had done. Then he crept up to the bed, and leant over the sleeping woman, listening for her low breathing. In a moment he lifted his head, took the candle from Murtagh, and snuffing out the nearly spent wick, placed it upon a chair beside the bed. Then they went out, closed the door and turned the key.

When the two men were alone in the detective's room, and the usual precautions attended to, Murtagh turned upon his companion.

"That's been too much for *me!*" he declared, "and I thought *I* knew a little about sleep-walking. *Was* she asleep, Ware?"

"Without a doubt!" They were standing face to face; Murtagh was too much aroused by what he had seen to think of the ordinary hospitalities. "She could not have played that *rôle* if she were Ristori herself. I never saw the like; such cases are few and far between—but I have read of similar ones."

"But—what was she *doing?* I supposed they always *repeated* themselves in that state—*she*—"

"Well—?" Ware smiled.

"Why, man, she was imitating—someone."

"Not a doubt of it, she was personating Lysander Deering."

"No! are you sure?"

"Sure. The thought struck me when she got herself into the gown and slippers; but when she began to pace the floor with her hands behind her—I happened to *know that* as a habit of Mr. Deering's."

"But what—how?—I thought—pshaw—she could never have done *that* in her waking moments?"

"No, but she may have *seen* just that pantomime *under some peculiar circumstance*, that was strange enough, or *strong* enough, to make a lasting impression. It has settled *one* question for us—or for me!"

"What is that?"

"Brook Deering's ghostly footsteps; I told you of them?"

"I remember."

"That dressing-room adjoins young Deering's sleeping-room. His bed stands near that wall. If he did not hear his father's footsteps, he heard, at least, a travesty of them."

"Surely. So he is not on the high road to insanity, after all?"

"I never supposed him to be." Ware's tone was dry, almost cynical. It caught Murtagh's attention.

"Shall you enlighten him?" he asked.

Instead of replying, the doctor asked a question. "Don't you want to see what the woman will do in the attic?"

"By all means!"

"Then I won't enlighten Deering. I would not—in any case—to be frank. It will cost us some trouble, but I should like to see her visit that room once more. I think I can guarantee that she will

'walk' again to-morrow night,—that is—if you want to put in another all night's vigil?"

"Doctor," the detective's eyes were studying him narrowly, "do you mean that you can influence her, or drug her into that state?"

"Drug her? No. Influence? Well, it *is* the mind that does this kind of thing. Sarita has been in an uncomfortable frame of mind during the last twenty-four hours, and this night's ramble was the outcome of it. I think I can keep up this same disturbed mental state,—that is all."

"Good heavens! *How?*"

"Pardon me. Like yourself, I have in my mind, hazy and half-formed, some ideas *so strange* that, until they take a less fantastic shape, I dare not give them utterance. I shall try hard to formulate—or disperse them—soon."

"Well, I won't question you, doctor, only—will you interpret what we have seen *to-night?*"

"As I can. First, Sarita, for some days, has been in a state of mental anxiety, in part, about herself, but mostly, about another—matter. This last anxiety to-day became so strong as to throw her into the strained, nervous condition which has resulted in what we have just witnessed. Of the instinct which led her to that room to-night I can only guess, but it was *not*, I am almost sure, to personate Mr. Deering. That was an after instinct, which came, I think, upon reaching the room, and which drove out, for a time, her first impression."

"Well!" ejaculated Murtagh, beginning to look about for a place to sit, "I can't quite make you out; but I m reasonably convinced of *one* thing!"

"What is that?"

"That Madam Sarita did not go to that room, alone, and at midnight, to-night *for the first time.*"

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE PRODIGAL BROTHER.

UNCLE HOLLY came late to breakfast next morning, so late, indeed, that all the family had breakfasted, and only Valentine remained in the morning-room, loitering over a vase of roses upon a low side table.

When the maid had put down his coffee and muffins, and retired to bring the glass of milk which he often took with his morning meal, and now demanded, Valentine, who had been chatting brightly across her shoulder, came close behind his chair, and, while in the act of leaning over to place a rosebud beside his plate, said, just above her breath:

"Rosa will see you in my boudoir when you have finished here;" and, as the door swung back, and a second maid came in with hot dishes, she went on louder and with perfect nonchalance, "My red African lily, by the way, has three blossoms; if you will not keep me

waiting *too* long, I will take you to my boudoir and let you peep at it."

In spite of this bait, "Uncle Holly" made his usual slow and hearty breakfast, while Val chatted with him across the table, and made believe eat a saucer of strawberries, and when he had finished, they went up the stairs together, she still talking airily, and he wearing in his button-hole the rosebud she had placed beside his plate.

In the upper hall they encountered Brenda, and Valentine said at once :

"Mr. Holly is coming to see my red lily ; there are three this morning ; won't you come, Brenda ?"

Brenda's answering smile was very shadowy : "Thank you, Val, I think I must go on. Brook has been quite ill again, Doctor Ware tells me. I am going to see him," and they went their separate ways.

The boudoir was untenanted when they entered it, and Valentine, merely proffering him a chair by the balcony window, where the vases of lilies were blooming, nodded her head and passed on to the next room.

A moment later he heard a door close sharply, and then Rosa entered through the curtained doorway by which her new mistress had gone. She held a key between her thumb and forefinger, and glanced at it as she approached him, sitting promptly down upon the light chair which he had pulled close before him.

"She has shut herself into her dressing-room, and made me lock her in," Rosa began in her quiet tones. "She's *so* charming, it's really a pleasure to be her maid ! only she won't let me do my whole duty," she stopped as abruptly as she had begun, and drew a folded paper from the bosom of her dress.

"It's there in detail," she said, in a business-like tone. "It's as you supposed ; evidently she has never thought of anyone questioning Judith, and has never cautioned her."

"And you found it all out ?"

"All ! Well—I found out that—at the time of her marriage she had the *full set ;* they were made at Tiffany's, and bear his mark. There was some sort of wager, or jest, which ended in her giving them each *one*."

"One ? You are *sure* of that ? *One* to *each ?*"

"Sure ! she has the rest ; the brooch and ear pendants still."

"And Sarita ?" he asked.

She glanced at the paper still in his hands.

"Sarita is more reserved than I could wish," she said.

"She is not in the best state of mind for sociability just now," he replied, smiling a little ; "have patience, and drop a word or two, at the right time, in praise of Mr. Brook Deering."

"You mean—the good-looking, blonde invalid ?"

"The same."

. . . . . .

Brook Deering was lying upon his bed when Doctor Ware visited him that morning. He was wrapped in a loose dressing-gown of a purplish blue shade, and the colour emphasised the pallor of his face and made him look ghastly.

He had passed another restless night, and had been troubled again by the ghostly footsteps. He was very nervous and unusually talkative; and, this morning, he had no doubt regarding his night's experience. He had *not* dreamed it; it was a ghostly visitation. He had heard his dead father's footsteps in his old room, of that he was sure. He told the story to Brenda when she came to see him, although he had been so reticent about his first experience, and had enjoined upon the doctor the strictest secrecy; and when Bruce came in, a little before luncheon time, he told it to him. When Sarita was admitted to his room, still later, for Doctor Ware had prohibited a morning visit, and limited that of the afternoon, he told it over again to *her*, in the presence and hearing of William.

By the next morning it was known all through the house that "Mr. Brook" had heard uncanny footsteps in his father's room, and that he was almost "out of his mind" in consequence; and while they were discreetly quiet in the presence of their superiors—below stairs the servants discussed the strange occurrence over and over.

Meantime—as the doctor had predicted—Sarita's first midnight ramble was followed by a second; and this time, when she went up the stairs leading to the mansard, with half of a fresh candle in the short brass candle-stand, she found the door at the top *open*.

She entered the older attic at once, and after some wandering about—carrying the candle with a firm and steady hand—she approached the door of the inner and newer apartment. At first she tried to open it, but when this failed she put down the candle as before, and after seeming to listen a moment with her ear close to the door, she knocked three knocks, slow and distinct, the same as before.

Murtagh, who had possessed himself of keys enough to unlock all of Beechwood, had arranged this unlocking the first attic door, leaving the inner one secure.

"I don't want to let her into that inner place," he had said to the doctor, "until I have examined it again myself, and can give more time to it."

Sarita lingered for some time at the door of the inner attic; but finally she took up the candle and retraced her steps slowly with lagging and reluctant movement.

At the foot of the stairs she seemed to waver, and then, as before, she put the candle down upon the steps and went slowly toward the front of the house.

Here, too, the detective had prepared the way for her, and set a limit to her movements. She found the door of Mr. Deering's chamber not only unlocked, but slightly ajar, and she entered readily. They had thought it best not to cause fresh alarm to Brook to-night, and so, while the dressing-gown hung over the chair as before, the slippers had been removed.

When the two watchers, keeping well in the rear of the sleep-walker, reached the turn which brought them into the main hall, they saw, to their annoyance, that the lamp which usually burned at about the middle of the hall-way was flickering and sputtering, and scarcely served to show them the way through the big, shadowy place; but a moment later the chamber, at the door of which they stood, was dimly illu-

minated, and they could see from their station outside that Sarita had lighted one of the burners in the dressing-room instead of those in the chamber, and that, leaving this burning low, she was again in the outer room and before the fire-place. As on the previous night, she lifted the dressing-gown and thrust her arms into the sleeves, drawing it about her so closely that the loosely scattered roses on the pale ground tint seemed to stand out like dark spots upon a moonlit surface, and then once again she seated herself in the great easy-chair.

And now, as they stand close to the wall on either side of the chamber door, a sound from below causes them to start and simultaneously glide across the threshold, where they stand pressed against the wall and intently listening.

The sound comes from that part of the wide hall where Brenda's rooms are situated, and it sounds ominously like the creak of a door opened quickly. There is silence for a moment, and then they hear another sound, and know it to be the soft trailing of a woman's dress across the hall floor. Into the mind of each the same thought comes; someone—Brenda or Valentine, or perhaps one of their maids, has opened a door, and has discovered the sputtering and dying hall lamp. No doubt the person is about to extinguish it altogether.

Brenda's rooms are not far down the hall, and on the same side as is that of Mr. Deering, and almost opposite her door is Valentine's. Murtagh hopes that it may chance to be Valentine, who is now so near them, and both men wish ardently that, whoever it is, the person will not pass beyond the lamp in the direction of the front. The light from the dressing-room sheds dim rays across the chamber, and almost to the place where they stand, and Sarita sits before the cold grate as moveless as themselves. If she will but remain thus, until the person in the hall has extinguished the light and retired—if she does retire.

Meantime, in the hall, a little below the open door, Brenda Deering stands looking up at the lamp, which is almost out of her reach; she has scented, through the open transom above her door, the fumes of the exhausted and smoking lamp, to which the two watchers, in their interest in Sarita's movements, had not given a thought; and, perfect house mistress that she is, with a thought to the health and comfort of all her household, she has ventured out; she has crossed the hall without once glancing about her, and she now raises herself upon the tips of her toes, and lifts her arm to the burner overhead. Then, something tempts her to glance about her, before putting the place, and herself, into darkness.

All along the hall is the same dim quiet; all the doors are closed, and each, in its deep set casing, throws up a dark shadow,—all?—she lets her arm drop at her side, and lowers her heels to the floor. What ails her vision? Why should that *one* place—the place where her husband's door *should* stand—in the same depth of shadow as stand the others—*why* should she seem to see *there* a luminous bar not of light, but of something less dark and dense than the shadows below and above it? Was it a reflection? She looks about her, and takes a few steps forward, and then she draws herself suddenly erect, and her eyes light up with indignation.

Brenda Deering, with her fine nerves and sensible training, never thinks of anything uncanny in what she sees, for now she knows that her dead husband's room is open ; that the weird light comes from within. And she glides quickly forward, her heart throbbing angrily at the thought that someone, doubtless of her own household, is prying, desecrating her dead husband's own—the place *she* has kept as sacredly as it had been in his life. With lip parted, and quivering, but not with fear, she creeps noiselessly up to the doorway and stands upon the threshold.

She does not see the dark forms on either side, and very near her; all that she realises is that the room is filled with grey, dusky light—she cannot see the source from where she stands—and that—sitting before the fire-place, dimly outlined, but just as she has often seen him, with one arm—clad in the rose-strewn gown,—and supporting his bent head—and with the other outstretched along the arm of the chair—ah, the familiar attitude !—sitting thus is—*Lysander Deering*—or his *ghost.*

It lasted but an instant, that thrill of horror, which, in another, less fine and strong, would have ended in a terrified shriek, that would have aroused every sleeper under that roof; and then, with a low moan, Brenda Deering swayed, drooped, and would have fallen, but for the ready arms that caught and held her, close and tenderly.

"Quick—the candle !" Felix Ware is bearing down the corridor, with quick, noiseless strides, and palpitating heart, a burden he would gladly hold and keep ; and Murtagh, with one swift backward glance at the figure in the chair, goes, with his fleetest, stillest steps, to the place where the candle still burns feebly upon the stairs.

By the faint light from the open windows, Ware can see a wide couch opposite the door, and there, slowly, gently, and most reluctantly, he lays her down ; and when Murtagh appears with the candle he is kneeling beside her.

"Put it down," he says quickly, "she will soon revive ; go back after *her.*" And Murtagh goes back to the somnambulist.

In the dim light the doctor kneels, his fingers upon the slender wrist, marking the reviving pulse beats ; there is a soft breeze blowing in through an open window ; in a moment those lovely eyes will unclose, and then—he stoops until his head is close above her own, and one word escapes his lips in a hushed whisper ; as if in response to it, the white lids are lifted, their eyes meet, and, for one short second, there is no *veil* between the souls looking out of those windows. Then the brown eyes droop, and a soft colour steals over the paleness of her cheeks.

"Do not speak nor stir, Mrs. Deering," he says softly ; "I can explain everything ; you have seen *a sleep-walker*, that is all !"

It is well that they are alone at that moment ; for the tenderness that he must not, dare not, put into words, speaks in his voice, making words superfluous ; and, for a moment, Brenda Deering is glad to lie with closed eyes, and let the strange, new sensation of rest and reassurance encompass and comfort her. She does not understand it, and does not seek to ; and when, a moment later, he gently puts down the wrist, in which the pulse is growing stronger, and rising, asks, still

with that lingering cadence so strangely comforting: "May I ring for your maid?" she points mutely to the bell, which connects with Judith's room.

The maid comes promptly, and the doctor, having made a brief explanation, and promised to return with "Mr. Holly" as soon as she has recovered a little and regained her calmness, goes in search of the other parties to this midnight episode; feeling somewhat anxious and uncertain as to the outcome.

As he steps cautiously out into the hall, a low "hist" greets him, and he stops short. Not six feet away from him Murtagh stands flattened against the wall, and, just outside the door of Mr. Deering's room, Sarita stands in the attitude of one listening.

For a little they stand so still, all three, that he can hear the ticking of his watch; then the woman waves her hand, as if in gesture to someone beyond her, stands a few moments as before, moves aside, as if to allow someone to pass, looks back, or seems to, as if at someone entering the room, and finally comes gliding toward the two watchers; she pauses at the turn in the hall, looks back, and then goes on, faster now, and—though the hall here is almost shrouded in darkness—with steps as sure as they are silent.

This time, as before, she ignores the candle, which has been restored to its place upon the stairway, and enters her room, leaving the door wide open as before, and lying down at once. As before, the doctor places the candle beside the bed, and closes the door.

Then the two men consult in low whispers.

"What did you tell her?" Murtagh begins.

"The truth, of course. That it was a sleep-walker, nothing more. But there must be an explanation."

"Will *you* make it? We have about reached a point where I must tell her of some of our discoveries. I can't go on until I *do*. But—it's too *soon*—a little. Who is with her?"

"Her maid."

"The dark woman? Well, she is as trusty as steel! *You* can tell the story from the physician's point of view, and no fear of the maid." He turned away, then—"You might just say, for *her* benefit—I mean the lady's-maid—the *lady* will understand it—that I was disturbed by the noise, or that we were mutually aroused—"

He broke off and turned toward his own door with a smile upon his lips; Doctor Felix, with a gesture of acquiescence, was going, with long, silent strides, toward Brenda's boudoir.

Brenda listens to his story of the sleep-walking in silent surprise. He tells of his first interview with Sarita, and, as delicately as possible, explains the part Mrs. Merton has taken in keeping the unpleasant business from Sarita's master and mistress; and Brenda listens with gentle words of sympathy for the afflicted one, and kindly encomiums for good Mrs. Merton.

"Poor Sarita!" she murmurs when all is told. "She must not be left alone after this! Someone must remain with her at night, both for her safety, and to secure the inmates of the house against such a fright as I have had to-night."

But, a little to her surprise, Doctor Felix demurs. "It will not be

wise, just now, to give Sarita a companion. It will be better not to let her dream that her secret is known. Such cases must be dealt with most delicately. Then—he is interested in watching her symptoms. In short, will Mrs. Deering trust Sarita's case to *him*, and be assured that she shall have no more cause for alarm?" etc., etc.

Of course he has his will. Brenda only stipulating that she shall be informed if Sarita's case becomes worse, and that she shall be given every possible medical aid and care.

"Sarita," she says, in her sweet solicitude, "has been one of our household for half a lifetime, almost. She is devotedly attached to all of us, especially to Brook; who was, as you of course know, her nursling, and always to Mr. Deering, to whom she could never be grateful enough. And, indeed, my husband *was* a very good friend to her."

Something, a note in the last words caused Doctor Felix to lift his head, which had been resting upon his hand, and to ask quickly:

"May I ask—do you know—if she has any friends—in this country?"

"Here?" he was certain of a little movement of surprise upon her part, and then she glanced toward her maid. "I hardly know now; there was a circumstance—some years ago—but it's a bit of Sarita's family history—and will hardly interest you, or be *à propos*."

"Pardon me. *Anything* you can tell me of Madam Sarita's past, will aid me *greatly* just now!"

"It was some years since," Mrs. Deering resumed, "ten, I should think—"

"Pardon me!" the maid broke in deprecatingly. "It is just *nine* years ago."

"Nine, thank you, Judith; if you can tell Doctor Ware anything more, pray do so. As I was saying, some nine years ago, Sarita came to my husband in great grief. She had found in a New York paper an account of one of those horrible saloon quarrels, that we read of so often—and among those who were hurt, was the name of a man who was, she was very sure, her brother. Her immediate family had been, even then, pretty well scattered, and she only knew, of *this* brother, that he had been for some years in London, and that, at her last account of him, he contemplated going to Canada. She has had but one correspondent from her own country in all the years she has lived with us, and that was a cousin, a woman of about her own age, I should think; her brothers, I believe she has several, never wrote to her, probably could not write."

"It is more than likely. And—about this newspaper matter?" he urged.

"Pardon me. I am as digressive as Mrs. Nickelby," she smiled faintly. "My husband, seeing her anxiety, took some pains to inquire into the matter, and found it to have been, in truth, Sarita's brother who was injured; it came out that the man was a rather disreputable character, and not altogether a victim in the affair; but, of course, Sarita's discovery of a brother's presence in this, to her, strange land, aroused her very much, so much that she made the one journey of her life, excepting, of course, the one across the ocean, and went to see him."

"Ah—and did he ever return that visit?" asked the doctor eagerly.

"Yes. He came once, not long after—in fact as soon as he was convalescent, I should fancy. I chanced to be absent at the time—so did not see him."

"Ah—then you can't tell me if he resembled his sister—or she him?"

"No;" she turned to her maid who sat a little in the background. "Perhaps Judith can."

"If you wish it, madam," murmured Judith.

"*I*—wish it," said the doctor quickly, "and Mrs. Deering permits it, I am sure."

"By all means," assented Brenda.

"What is it that you wish most to know?" asked Judith, as if in doubt.

"Tell me all you can recall of this brother. I have my especial reasons for wishing to know something of one of Sarita's family. Did you see much of him?"

"Very little, sir. He came only to the kitchen door, and would never enter. He was not too well dressed—though I know that Mr. Deering was most generous to Sarita, and that Sarita gave him money. He scarcely stayed two days, and all that I can tell is that he seemed to want Sarita to take him in, to get him a place. I know that she asked Mr. Deering to give him work about the garden or stables; but, after seeing the man, and talking with him a little, he called Sarita aside and told her, very kindly, I am *sure*, that her brother was evidently not fitted for either the garden or a groom's place, and he advised her to let him go elsewhere."

"And—he went?"

"He went that day."

"Have you heard of him since?"

"No, sir. That is he never came back again—but he wrote to his sister after he went away."

"Ah—does he write to her *still?*"

"I cannot say, sir. I have not heard her speak of him for a long time; not in two years, I am sure."

Doctor Ware thanked her for this information, and put a few questions, thus getting a fragmentary description of this prodigal brother. And when he dropped the subject it was with the full intention of talking with Judith again—and alone.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

CONCERNING THE AMETHYST BUTTON.

THE day after Brenda's fright was a quiet one at Beechwood; Brook did not leave his room and was very nervous and strange. He would not be left alone for a moment, and kept Bruce at his side the greater part of the day. Doctor Ware also spent much of his time there. As for Brenda, for the first time since Lysander Deering's burial she did not appear at the breakfast table, sending Judith below with her morning greetings and excuses.

"It is not that she is really *ill*," the maid had said in answer to Valentine's questions, "but she had not a good night, and feels the need of rest—and quiet.—No, she needed nothing," this to Doctor Felix, "only repose, and she would join them at dinner, doubtless."

And this, indeed, she did; lying, meanwhile, for most of the day, in pale and serious tranquillity, wondering why she should feel so strangely calm, and comforted, in the midst of so much that was yet sad, mysterious, and shrouded in doubt.

In the absence and preoccupation of the others, Murtagh saw a wished-for opportunity, and, while the sun was yet in the east, he and Valentine, she with her book and he with the morning paper, found their way, evidently by mutual consent, to that bower among the trees where the hammocks swung and the rustic seats invited to repose, repose and seclusion in the midst of the green north lawn, where none save the birds in the branches above could possibly play the eavesdropper.

Valentine Rodney was nothing if she was not direct—direct, serious, and fearless. And they were scarcely placed, she in a swinging hammock and the disguised detective upon a bench close by, when she turned her dark eyes full upon him, with a shade of displeasure in their charming depths.

"Mr.—Holly—if it is not *too* much of a secret—I would like to know why your, or *my* new maid, must needs rummage in *my* writing-desk, and among *my* letters?"

The detective looked at her with a gleam of admiration in his eyes.

"So," he said, half-smiling, "you have found us out? Has Rosa's hand lost its cunning, I wonder?"

"Not at all; Rosa is very expert. Only, I chance to have a good eye for details, and fancying once that my desk had been disturbed, I set a little trap—as it were."

"And caught Rosa?"

"No, only frustrated her plans, and locked my desk—I habitually leave it open—until I could ask you if this is a necessary part of your work—or—"

"Or—if Rosa is doing a little work on her own account, eh?" He moved along to the end of the rustic *tête-à-tête* nearest her, and leaned forward. "We must not do Rosa injustice. And so—what if I say that she is only obeying *me?*"

"Then—I ask again, *why?*"

Murtagh's face grew suddenly grave, and his next words were uttered with quiet dignity.

"Miss Rodney, have you withdrawn your confidence in me?"

"N—no," she said slowly. "No—but—"

"Then listen; and trust Rosa as myself. She swears by *you* already. If I wanted her to do you the least hurt, I fancy she would throw up the game, and turn her back upon me, practical, trained detective as she is. If I tell you what she sought in your desk and among your letters, will you *trust* me, and ask no questions? Remember, I am working even *in this matter—for you!*"

A moment her eyes met and questioned his, then she said impulsively:

"Tell me! I do trust you. I *must!*"

"I have a strong reason for wishing to see two specimens of handwriting. I hoped to find them in your desk, and to *replace* them, without troubling you or arousing your wonder and anxiety."

"Whose?"

"Shall I have them?"

"*Whose?*"

"Not Mrs. Deering's,—and not Bruce Deering's." He paused a moment. "*Am* I to have them?" he repeated.

"Yes!"

"Have you a specimen of Miss Wardell's writing?"

She started, and was silent a moment.

"Yes," she said finally.

"And—of Mr. Brook Deering's?"

"*Brook's?*" again she hesitated. "Yes."

"I happened to know that Miss Wardell called upon you, soon after your return from New York, upon some business connected with a letter. Don't look so surprised; I have not been quite *idle*, and the servants *will* pick up these little morsels. Are you willing to tell me about this visit?"

Valentine's face was troubled.

"This is necessary?" she questioned.

"Absolutely, and quite harmless as well. This shall never come back to you. In answering me, in telling me all, you are serving yourself and your own cause—not *me*."

"Then," said Valentine, sitting erect and putting her book aside, "begin; I will tell you what I can."

"Thank you! But please resume your book, and let us seem, to any accidental observer—there can be no hearers—to be discussing poetry."

They sat for a long time under the trees, looking as idle and comfortable as possible; but Murtagh, by degrees, was piecing together the story of Ora Wardell's two visits to Beechwood: the first to return the exchanged, or mis-sent letter from Brook Deering, and the second to secure the valuable recipe for Mrs. Fram. This, and much more; and, later in the day, Rosa's duty was lessened, much to her surprise, by Valentine's self, who, sitting down before her open desk, deliberately made up a small packet, which she gave with a queer half smile into the maid's own hand, saying:

"There, Rosa, take them to *Mr. Holly* with my compliments! They are *all* there—and *your* hands are left clear for—something else."

There was a malicious little smile upon Valentine's lips, and an answering twinkle in Rosa's shrewd grey eyes, but no further word was spoken upon the subject of the letters, and Rosa was in deed and truth quite idle for the time.

For two or three days after this, the time passed in seeming uneventfulness, and the house was still very quiet. Brook Deering did not seem to rally from the nervous attack which had caused him to consult, and confide in, Doctor Ware; and he kept his room now almost entirely. The nervous symptoms seemed to increase, and there were feverish symptoms too, with loss of appetite and sleep; and when

Doctor Ware was asked about his patient's condition he gave evasive answers, or only shook his head and looked grave.

In the servants' living-room the case was discussed with interest, and all agreed that it was growing serious.

"It's my opinion," said one of the housemaids, quite aware that she was voicing the popular belief—"It's *my* opinion that Mr. Brook's going into a decline! He wa'n't never real rugged, Mrs. Merton says, and he wa'n't half well when he come home that horrid night. He'd been sick, and then gittin' pitched down them horrid banks; *my!* but wasn't he *lame!* and *so pale!* and then there's his pa's death, and that trouble about Mr. Bruce,—the beastly shame that it is—it's been enough to break down a *tough* man, let alone *him!* Sarita says he's *so* like his *ma;* and *she's* afraid he's inherited her constitution too!"

During these quiet days, Bruce Deering was not often found in drawing-room or library, and Brenda and Val, Murtagh and the doctor, were often a quartette at luncheon, and during the evening hours in the drawing-room. Bruce was usually present at the breakfast and dinner hour, and he passed some time each day in his cousin's room, but the time of the "Matchin trial" was approaching, and nearly every day, after leaving his cousin, he rode into Pomfret, where he spent much of his time in John Redding's private office; presumably in consultation with his lawyer.

Murtagh, too, began to spend much of his time in the retirement of his own rooms. Among his numerous pretensions, in the character of Uncle Holly, was that of a scribbler of what he described as "brief etchings, or little jottings," of his "reflections," upon the subjects which he "had studied a little," and upon which, by the way, he could prose endlessly in the drawing-room. He always left fragments of these half-written "etchings" lying in loose sheets upon his round table, much to the disgust of the maid, who, if she had given thought to the matter, would have been obliged to declare that, never, by any chance, was the least scrap of a letter left thus open to view. His correspondents, to be in keeping with his assumed character, were very few, as he frequently declared, and as his letters, of which he received not a few, came, first through Mr. Baird, and later, some of them, under cover to Doctor Ware, there was no occasion to doubt his statement.

Several of these mysterious and bulky enclosures had reached him of late through the doctor, and he passed hours of his time pacing the length of his room and jotting down "ideas" alternately.

On the fourth day after Mrs. Deering's fright, Murtagh, by a signal of which the two now had a sufficiently complete code, summoned the doctor to join him in his room, and at once.

To be admitted to Murtagh's room by day, meant, Ware felt assured, something important; perhaps imperative. But it was easy enough to join him after paying his usual morning visit to Brook. The ladies were below stairs, and Bruce was about to read the morning paper to the invalid.

He had delivered an unusually thick packet to Murtagh on the previous evening, addressed in a hand he had seen before, and post-marked New York; and he quite expected the forthcoming communication to concern, in some way, this communication. But he

opened his eyes in surprise, when, having seated himself opposite Murtagh, with the usual precautions of closed door and adjusted screen, the latter began at once:

"Did you sleep soundly last night?"

"Quite."

"Hear anything?" Murtagh was looking very alert and smiling. He was bending slightly toward his *vis-à-vis*, and reminded him, by his attitude and expression, of the look he had seen upon the face of some victor of a sharp and closely contested game, at the moment of anticipated triumph.

"Nothing," he answered, expectantly.

"Well—not to keep you in suspense, *I* was wakeful, very; and—*as a result*—I have identified *the other cat.*"

"*No?*"

"*Yes!* and I was *right!* The *one* came from town, and *on foot.* No cowardice in *that* woman! The other—" There was a paper lying before him upon the table containing some lines of writing, and, below these, a list of names. He picked up a pen which lay near, and, drawing a long black mark beneath one of these names, pushed the paper across the table, with the look of triumph intensified, and without another word.

Ware read the name and uttered a sudden, sharp exclamation; his face actually paling as he looked up at the detective.

"Is this—beyond a doubt?" he asked after a moment's silence, and below his breath.

"Beyond a doubt."

"Great heavens! And what will you do—*now?*"

"First—I'll ask your advice; I don't mind saying *to you* that I never found myself in quite such a ticklish place as this! It's—it's without a precedent in criminal history, I surely believe! And it leaves us as much in the dark as ever, upon *one* important point."

"What point?"

"The *motive!* Is *that* any clearer to *you?*"

Ware shook his head. "I see none yet," he said gravely. "May I ask if this will enable you to make any movement—aggressive or other?"

"It does—and it does not! That is—if it does not aid, it determines me. Deering's trial is coming close, and I must have my guns all planted and trained before that begins. In fact, I should have made some move even if I had not made this discovery; I *must!* And first—will you go to New York? I can't trust anyone else."

"For what purpose?"

"You remember the little I told you about the amethyst cuff button, and Wiggins?"

"Yes—that is, you told me that such a thing was found, or said to be, by this fellow Wiggins and secreted by him in the hope of making something out of it."

"Yes. Well that's all I felt justified in telling *then:* now I'll tell you the whole story. And, to begin, you must know that Mrs. Deering, our hostess, once owned a set of this same pattern." Ware started violently, but Murtagh went on, as if unobservant of the movement:

"And in some way—for some reason, she broke the set, and gave away the pair of cuff buttons."

Doctor Felix drew a breath of relief at this point, so deep that Murtagh could not, or did not, restrain a smile, as he went on with his story: "One of them she gave to Mr. Brook Deering—the other—to Bruce."

"Horrible!" broke from the doctor's lips.

"*One* of these buttons, or a facsimile, was found by Wiggins, so he claims, on the very scene of the murder; I told you that?"

"Yes."

"But I did *not* tell you that Bruce and Brook Deering have *theirs* still; both have been seen in their possession since the murder. Now let me tell you the whole history, so far as I know it."

He told it quickly and graphically. How Wiggins had sought to blackmail Mrs. Deering, how Tom Wells had played "providence," and stopped Wiggins' game, and of his own interviews with Bruce and Wiggins.

"I should not be telling you this," he explained, "even *now*, if I had not first obtained Mrs. Deering's permission to do so, at need. And now I want you to take these two buttons,—did I tell you they were made at Tiffany's?—to take them to New York, and find out, if you can, if they *have ever been duplicated*, and, if so, for *whom*. Will you do it? going and returning at the earliest possible moment? Wait, one word in explanation,—I *might* trust this to a detective, but I want, for Mrs. Deering's sake, to keep this matter among her *friends;* we don't know *what* may come of this, and—"

The doctor stopped him with a swift gesture. "One moment," he said, "Mrs. Deering! does she know? I will go with her consent, at her wish—not without."

"Then rest satisfied. We talked this over yesterday out there under the big oak, she and I, and—it may ease your mind to know that she objected, or, at least, demurred, when she thought I meant to entrust the business to a 'professional,' but when I told her I hoped *you* would go, she said she was *sure you* would know how to act—and that she could trust *you* entirely. She even commissioned me to *ask* you to 'do *her* this service,' for she now sees, although she did not at first, that this mystery of the buttons *must* be cleared up, in justice to all concerned."

When Ware had consented, which he did promptly now, and they had discussed the how and the when of the journey, the doctor said, by way of closing a long sentence:

"I would like to watch the progress of Brook Deering's malady from day to day, but, perhaps, it will be best to bring Doctor Liscom in and give him charge. I shall depend upon *you* to lock Sarita in at night, of course; and, by-the-by, I suppose you have those buttons ready to hand?"

Something seemed to amuse the detective very much, but, after a stifled laugh, he answered: "I have one, the one—as I have already related—given me by Wells. The other, doctor, I mean to *steal* to-night—and you must help me."

"I!—how?"

"Easily. We can't be squeamish in *this* case. You must declare your intention to sit up with the invalid to-night; send William to the right-about, and give your patient some harmless sleeping potion. When the house is still, and the patient asleep, admit me—I'll attend to the rest."

Doctor Ware had not put his hand to the plough to look back, even when brought face to face with this burglarious proposition. He said, after a moment's thought, and with resolute gravity:

"Very well. I believe the end justifies the means. Does Mrs. Deering know how you propose to get this second button?"

"Not she! She presumes the *one* to be quite sufficient." He drew a sheet of paper toward him, and took up a pen. "I'm going to order your summons," he said, "that is, to write to the office requesting them to send you a wire on the instant, calling you to the city. This letter, I wish I dared *telegraph*, will be received, let me see—to-morrow at noon; before night you will have your wire, and you can leave at once, by the night train."

"And how then can I arrange with Liscom?"

"*I'll* arrange with Liscom—that's easily done," and he hastily finished and enclosed the letter. "There—*you* must address it," pushing it across the table, "and post it as well; *now* we must disperse."

The programme, as arranged, was carried out, and with success; contrary to Murtagh's expectations, the button, which he was fully prepared to rummage for half the night, if need be, was easily found in the very receptacle in which it had been exhibited to Brenda; this thrown carelessly into a drawer of Brook's desk, among letters, cards, pamphlets, and the usual debris of "odds and ends;" the drawer was not even under lock and key.

"I don't understand it!" Murtagh declared; "but I'm well enough pleased! If he misses it, he will lay its loss to the servants, poor devils, and blame himself, if he's sensible, for being so careless."

"It would not surprise me," the doctor commented with an odd smile, "if he were *not* quite sensible twenty-four hours from now."

"What do you mean?" demanded Murtagh.

"Wait and see," was the only answer.

CHAPTER XLIX.

INSANE.

BEFORE Murtagh, who had broken so many vials of surprise above the doctor's astonished head, had said adieu to him, previous to his setting out for New York, he was in turn treated to a bit of mystery.

"Two things I mean to do," he had said when discussing plans and possibilities, "and to do them *soon*. I intend to see Miss Wardell, and Sarita, and *both*, probably, in my character of detective."

"I want to make a request," the doctor said, shortly before they separated, after their last counsel, held this time upon the bench be-

side the terrace. "You spoke of seeing Miss Wardell, and Sarita—will you promise me *not* to do so until after my return?"

"Why?"

"I can say nothing more now than that I think, I am almost *certain*, that I can tell you something which may have a strong influence upon—upon the matter you will probably bring before them. I am quite sure that what I hope to tell you then, will strengthen your case with them *materially*. It will only be four days, or five, at most," he added, seeing the detective hesitate; "I wish *you* would trust *me* in this!"

"And so I *will!*" declared Murtagh with sudden fervour. "I would be a churl not to! As you say, it won't be long, and I might have waited in any case. Set your mind at rest on that point, doctor."

But Murtagh was not idle altogether.

On the day of Doctor Ware's departure, the new maid was taken ill, so ill that she kept her room, and was quite troublesome. On the following day she was worse, and a few tiny red spots had appeared upon her hands, and about the edges of her hair. She was exceedingly nervous, too, and when good Mrs. Merton, seeing the red spots, suggested scarlet fever, Rosa became "panicky," and declared that she "*must* go home, to her sister's house;" where she could be cared for by her own doctor, and her Aunt Jemima, who was a trained nurse, and "better than doctors in scarlet fever."

And so, on the third day, after so much fussiness, and so many changes of mind, that poor Mrs. Merton was quite worn out, and was almost glad to see her go, Rosa departed, pallid and spotted, but "quite able to keep up," she declared, "on her strength of will," until she reached Aunt Jemima and her "married sister," whose address she quite forgot to leave behind.

The going away of Valentine's maid, under ordinary circumstances, would have been a subject for much discussion among the servants; but a sudden alarm, which spread itself through the house almost at the moment of her going, turned the tide of thought, and made Rosa's departure a thing of little moment.

It was next day, the day after Doctor Ware's going, and at noon, just as the family, including Mr. Baird, who had called early in the day—having been requested so to do by Doctor Felix, on his way to the station—were sitting down to luncheon, that they were startled by the sudden entrance of William, breathing hard and with a scared face.

"Mrs. Deering!" he cried, "Mr. Bruce! won't *some*one come to Mr. Brook, *quick!* and—and send—for Doctor Liscom! Mr. Brook—is—*gone wrong!*"

Bruce was at his side instantly.

"Quick," he said sternly. "*What* do you *mean?*"

"His *head*—sir! He's off—his *head.*"

"And alone?"

"No, sir—Sarita—she chanced to be upstairs—she's with him—but—"

Bruce was already at the door, and when Uncle Holly dropped his napkin and hastily arose it did not surprise anyone. "Allow me to go with you," was all he said to Bruce, and he said it like one who did not mean to be denied. "Ladies, remain here; I will report to you."

They found Brook walking the floor of his dressing-room with light, quick steps, and his eyes fairly scintillated blue sparks, while his cheeks flushed and paled alternately. He was muttering softly to himself as they entered, and seemed to utterly ignore the nearness of Sarita, who stood, with pallid countenance and clasped hands, near the door by which they had entered.

For a moment they watched him in silence, and he continued to pace restlessly, seeming to see nothing and no one. Then Bruce spoke in his usual tone, "Brook, have you lunched?"

Brook, who was moving toward them, stopped short and looked at them with an uneasy, questioning glance. Then he turned and resumed his walk and his muttering. The two men at the door exchanged glances, and Murtagh said in a low tone, "Wait here while I question William," and went out quietly, while Bruce dropped into a chair and signalled Sarita to do the same. "Has he spoken to you?" he whispered.

Sarita shook her head, and essayed to speak.

"Hush," he said, "let us watch him a few moments, and try and find the *meaning* of this."

"Oh," she murmured, "it is only what I have *feared* ever since the doctor said to me that he *could* not *cure the mind;* this is what he *meant!*"

"Did he say that?"—Bruce checked himself, seeing that Brook was again coming toward them, and that he had ceased to mutter; and for some moments there was silence in the room, save for the soft tread of the sick man's slippered feet over the carpet.

Outside, in the hall beyond, William was talking hurriedly and brokenly to Mr. Baird and Murtagh.

"Yes, sir, I was awake all night. Mr. Brook was very restless. He would nap a little and then wake up with a quick sort of jump like, and I thought several times that he talked a sort of *queer;* but I s'posed he'd been dreaming. This morning he woke up—he must a slept for a'most two hours right sound—and his eyes looked a'most as bright as they do now. He made me fix his bath, and he got in, but he didn't stir the water hardly, then he got out and laid down, and, just as I thought he was going to sleep, up he jumps and tells me to dress him to *ride,* and nothing would do but dressed he would be. All this time he'd been pretty pale, but after he'd been dressed he sat a long time in the big chair by the west window and I couldn't tell if he was half asleep or not; his eyes were shut, mostly, and every now and then he'd start most out of his chair, like he was scared, sort of, in his sleep, and I noticed him begin to sort of flush red and then turn white again."

"At what time was this?" queried the detective.

"That was near nine o'clock, and then, all at once, he gits up as if he was most tired out and begins to talk just as if he had *been* riding, and had just come *in;* and he orders me to help him off with his clothes and goes to bed again. Well, sirs, I was tired enough, but his queer actions had worried me so that I didn't want to leave him. It drove the sleep all out of me. I had had some coffee, after his'n, in his room, and when he went off to sleep, all of a sudden, after laying down, I jest *sat* there, and, before I knew it, I was napping in the big chair.

That was a little after nine o'clock, and next thing *I* knew, something waked me sudden, and there was Master Brook, fully dressed just as you saw him, Mr. Holly. He was sitting at his desk and was laughing so queer; it was *that* had waked me up. Well, I spoke to him and he didn't take any notice, but pretty soon began to write and talk to himself, and then I began to be badly scared, he looked so wild. I spoke to him again, and then he began to call me *Bruce*, and seemed to think he and Mr. Bruce were schoolboys again. Pretty soon he began to throw down the papers on his desk, one after another, *just* as he used to throw away his playthings when he was little, sir, as *I* can remember well; and then the little Swiss clock began to shake, and I fairly jumped, for it was one o'clock. It seemed to disturb *him*, too, for he began to walk and mutter again, and then I couldn't stand it any longer. The doctor has charged me more than once if anything went wrong with Mr. Brook not to run to the ladies and scare them, but to call upon Mr. Bruce, or you, Mr. Holly—but I clean forgot myself. I looked out, and seeing Sarita outside in the hall, I called her and ran down to you. It's *terrible*, sir! You don't think it will last, Mr. Holly?"

"Of course not," declared "Mr. Holly," briskly. "It's an attack of nerves no doubt."

But it did last. All that day, and the next, and for many days after. And now they could remember, every one of them, some word or act which might have served as a warning, a hint, of the trouble brewing in that handsome *blonde* head.

Doctor Liscom was summoned at once, and remained a part of each day near the patient during the time of Doctor Ware's absence; while Bruce was constant in his attendance upon his cousin, and even "Uncle Holly" lent a hand, and proved himself, what he declared himself to have been in his earlier days, a capital nurse.

Their work was not made difficult by any unpleasant outbreak or wildness, but after the first breaking down Brook seemed to have lost himself altogether, to be a mariner without chart or compass. He had no hallucination regarding himself. He was always Brook Deering, and for the most part a very amiable and gentle Brook indeed. But he had turned back the years, and was sometimes a schoolboy and sometimes occupied with the more recent past; but always it was the *past;* never at any time the present. He was very docile for the most part, and inclined to silence. There were moments of flightiness, but they were infrequent, and he was never noisy or quarrelsome. But sometimes he seemed overtaken with an imp of sulkiness, and never at any time did he properly distinguish those about him. He held long talks, sometimes with "Bruce," upon some long-gone-by schoolboy topic of interest; but the Bruce to whom he talked was, one day, William, and the next Doctor Liscom, or even Brenda; while he addressed Mrs. Merton as Brenda and William as Merton. In short, he fitted the name with which his fancy was occupied to any shoulders, regardless of station or sex; but it was noted that he never once spoke the name of his dead father; and he seemed to have forgotten the existence of Uncle Holly and Doctor Ware; while Valentine's name was only uttered at rare intervals.

And this was the reason why Valentine's new maid, who had won

such a sudden popularity at Beechwood, left that place less than two hours after Brook's outbreak, so very quietly, with such perfunctory adieus, and so little thought as to the manner of her going, and why she was so utterly forgotten, being gone. Nevertheless, Mrs. Merton had not neglected to furnish her with a substantial basket of toothsome luncheon, which, in spite of her invalid condition, perhaps because of her limited diet while enacting her invalid *rôle*, Rosa began to enjoy before she was far on her way; and Uncle Holly had contrived to encounter her in one of the upper halls, and while dropping a word of paternal and patronising advice, had slipped into her hand a paper, thin in texture, and folded small, which—having fortified herself with Mrs. Merton's luncheon—she prepared herself to read and consider at leisure.

She had taken a compartment to herself, and she settled into it comfortably, and assured herself by a few quick, sharp glances that there were no observant or curious eyes upon her before unfolding the much-doubled-up sheet, which read thus—

"No. 11 (Sparks) has the items that will help you; *get them.* No. ——, 59th Street, is an apartment house, and, up to yesterday, two women were inmates; one, the elder, is a Frenchwoman of middle age, *very French*, but speaking English like a native. She has in charge a pretty little blonde, probably nineteen or thereabouts, over whom she keeps close guardianship. You will go to the chief for funds, and to Madam L—— for wardrobe, jewels, etc., enough for a swell lady of, say, a fortnight or more. *If possible*, take rooms in the house, and *as near as possible* to the Frenchwoman. Make *her* acquaintance, *see* the little blonde. *Rôle* lady of fortune alone, and looking for *right sort* of companion for extended European tour. Make no *effort* to *know* blonde, but get, if possible, the name of *a certain absent lover.* Will advise further through office. Don't lose sight of *either*, especially *blonde.*"

As this document began with no date or address, so it ended, with no signature; but when Rosa had read it slowly for the second time, she copied the address of the apartment house carefully upon her tablets, and then, tearing the paper into tiny fragments, let them flutter from her fingers slowly, as the train flew on, until Detective Murtagh's instructions were scattered broadcast along half a dozen miles of wood and field, hill and dale and hollow—after which she sat and thought, and smiled as she apostrophised herself.

"Fers Murtagh always *does* contrive to get the cream of the cases! I'd give something to know the inside of *this* one! One thing is sure, I never saw two women better worth looking at, or loving, or working for, than those two at Beechwood; I only hope that the work I'm about to take in hand will benefit *them* in the way they need most!" And then, a little later, "I would have liked to stay at Beechwood long enough to find out the skeleton in that Sarita's closet, and why she detests Mrs. Deering, and is, at the same time, so anxious to ingratiate herself with pretty Miss Valentine, who *loathes* her by instinct. That Sarita is—*a cat!*"

CHAPTER L.

STEADFAST.

DOCTOR WARE returned, after five days of absence, by an evening train, and Doctor Liscom, who had passed almost the entire afternoon in, or near, Brook's room, turned the patient over to him at once, only too glad to go back to those other patients of whom he had always a goodly list.

Of course there was the usual closeting together, or "consultation;" during which they were quite frank with each other, after, on the part of Liscom, at least, a little skirmishing; and, secluded and mysterious as these rites are usually made, *this* was even more secluded than usual, for, acting upon a hint from Doctor Ware, Murtagh promenaded the hall, just outside the door behind which they "consulted." So that when Sarita, with stealthy steps and an anxious face, came out from her room, she started back, and almost cried out at sight of the plump figure and amiable visage of Uncle Holly, ambling slowly past the door of the doctor's room, with his hands beneath his coat tails, and seemingly lost in reverie.

For a moment the woman hesitated, and then murmuring something about being startled, and not observing him—at first, she passed on, with reluctant steps, and went below, while the disguised detective smiled as she disappeared, and said to himself:

"Not yet, Madam Sarita! I know you are anxious, but—so am *I*. And it's *my* turn next! At least, I mean it *shall* be."

When Doctor Liscom had left him, Ware sent for William, and, after him, admitted Murtagh for a short time. He had arrived a little before the dinner-hour, and having telegraphed the time of his coming, according to agreement, Brenda had ordered that meal delayed. He had not yet seen the ladies, but had been closeted at once with Doctor Liscom—only exchanged a word, in passing, with the detective—and now Murtagh's first words were:

"Well, doctor, whatever you may have to surprise *us* with, we have evolved a big one for *you*, eh?"

"You mean—a big *surprise?*"

"Exactly."

"Then you are *wrong;* I saw the symptoms before I left."

"The mischief—you did! Well, it's almost dinner-time, and we can't talk, at length, until midnight, if then. In a word, then—did you succeed?"

Ware took a thin envelope from an inner pocket and placed it in his hand.

"My memoranda is there," he said, "*all* of it; the button *has been duplicated.*"

"Ah! I was *sure* of it! And by Tiffany?"

"By Tiffany. It was done, nearly two years ago, for a person whose description, vaguely given—but—still sufficient for our purpose, I fancy—you will find written there," nodding toward the thin envelope in Murtagh's hand. "There were two duplicates—a pair."

"Ah!" with a sudden brightening of his countenance, "that *fits!*" He stowed the envelope away with deliberate carefulness, and turned toward the door. "Now, I can wait; get into your highlows, doctor, I won't bother you longer."

"One moment." Murtagh withdrew his hand from the door and turned back. "About Deering, I mean Brook, of course. He must have *a keeper*."

"What—besides William? Do you anticipate anything worse?"

Ware's eyes met his for a moment. "I don't look for more violence than at present, but William can't watch night and day. Someone must be with him *nights;* and someone chosen by *us* might be of use to us, perhaps, as well as of service to Deering. Can you name a man?"

"Yes," replied Murtagh, promptly, "*Tom Wells.*"

. . . . . .

Two days later Tom Wells came, and was duly installed. No one questioned his becoming "an assistant," in the case of Brook Deering, who must never be left alone, the doctors both declared, by day nor night. Wells was known to be, not only strong and honest, but gentle as well; and not without experience in the sick-room. As for Brook, he received him as he did the others, calling him Bruce, William, and sundry other names by turns.

One of the results of the midnight talk after Ware's return from New York, was the decision that Mrs. Deering must be somewhat further enlightened; she must hear about the concealment in the church, and in her own attic, and must learn what they now knew concerning Ora Wardell and Sarita.

As affairs now stood at Beechwood, it was not so difficult to manage an interview there, and so when Bruce had ridden away to see John Redding next day, and Brook lay sleeping, under the watchful eye of William, Murtagh found the chance to drop a hint to Valentine; who at once declared her ability to keep Sarita out of mischief, and, this being arranged, Brenda had only to tell her trusty Judith that she wished an uninterrupted talk with her uncle and the doctor, in her boudoir, to insure for them seclusion and security from possible eavesdroppers.

It was at her own request, somewhat hesitatingly made, that Doctor Ware joined in the conference.

"Of course," she had said to Murtagh, "I leave it with you to decide, only—as Doctor Ware knows so *much*, almost *all* in fact, of our troubles and complications, and as he seems to have aided you materially—"

"He has, indeed," Murtagh interpolated.

"Yes. And it seemed—I thought—perhaps his advice—if there *is* a question to decide—"

"There *is*—a grave one!"

"Then, might it not be well—perhaps—to ask him—to join us?"

"By all means!" affirmed Murtagh. "I was about to propose it to you," which was not quite true, although the arrangement suited him perfectly. In truth, bluff Murtagh stood just a bit in awe of this fair, self-contained gentleman; and a certain something, an "atmo-

sphere," which his shrewd eyes and instincts had detected, when Brenda and Doctor Felix chanced to encounter each other, for a brief exchange of words in morning-room, hall, or sick-room, had made him shy of suggesting what he really thought would be wise and helpful.

Brenda Deering listened to the detective's story very silently, and with a fixedness of countenance and a self-control which was wonderful. She scarcely stirred or removed her fine eyes from his face, while he narrated his experience, not only since coming to Beechwood, but from the moment of his arrival in Pomfret ; and she only once interrupted him by a question from the first word to the last.

"In order to explain my methods and my reasons for it," he began, "as well as to make clear to you later events, I must begin with my arrival in your village on the day after Joe Matchin's murder, and must tax your patience by recalling some of the details of that affair."

It was at this point that the lady lifted her head, and checked his speech by a gesture.

"Allow me to ask one question," she said, with a gleam of excitement in her eyes, and in her voice an anxiety which she could not altogether suppress. "In referring to the Matchin affair, you have, of course, a reason. Am—am I right in thinking that it—that matter—may be in some way connected with—*this?*" She had turned her eyes from one to another while putting the question, and now, while the doctor seemed to hesitate, the detective replied with prompt decision :

"You are *right!* Quite right."

"Thank you ; that is all." She withdrew her gaze for a moment, and settled herself in her chair, as if to listen. "Will you go on?" she added, noting the momentary silence.

And sitting thus, she leaning back in her low chair, with her white hands clasped upon her lap and her eyes fixed upon the narrator's face, while the doctor, elbow upon knee and chin upon hand, kept his own fine orbs bent upon her. Murtagh told his story, not in full, perhaps, and with some reservations ; but when he had ended, she knew, at least, that someone had been concealed in St. Mark's, and in her own attic ; and that Miss Wardell and Sarita had played suspicious parts in the unfinished drama.

It was a strange recital to which Brenda Deering listened, and might well have overwhelmed her with amazement, but there was no word of surprise or doubt. She had listened intently, and her first word showed them that she had quite grasped the situation, and that they would have no need to argue or convince.

She remained silent for some moments after Murtagh had ceased speaking, and both men waited anxiously her first word.

"I cannot trace your reasoning," she said at last, quite calmly ; "but, if I have followed you aright, you hold the belief that both crimes, that of the bank and—and *this*, were committed by the *same person?*"

"Yes," said both men at once.

"And—from the same—*motive?*"

Murtagh shook his head.

"You have not named either the person or motive," she went on. "Am I to be told—all?" her voice grew husky upon the last words, and

she shivered perceptibly ; but her countenance was still under perfect control. It was only when told that the motive, or motives, still remained a mystery, and that the author of the two crimes was only suspected or dimly guessed at, that she evinced surprise and deep disappointment.

"Ah!" she sighed. "I had hoped the suspense was nearly over. *Any* certainty, it seems to me, would be better than *this!* And we seem, after all, a long, long way from the end!"

"Pardon me," broke in the detective. "We hope for better things, Mrs. Deering, or we would never have troubled you with these fragments of discovery. Mr. Deering's trial is approaching ; I hope and *expect* to bring matters to a crisis *before that trial ends.* And my chief object in coming to you at this particular time, is to ask your co-operation. I have reached a point where, according to our agreement, I must look to you for orders to go on. Mrs. Deering, will you give us—for Doctor Ware is in full counsel with me now—will you give us *carte blanche* to go on—*straight on* to the *end?* Understand me. I expect, and intend, only to *convict* the criminal, to drive home the *proof* of his guilt—or *theirs*—and then, before it is made public, to lay all before *you.* It will remain for you to say whether I shall carry my knowledge and my proofs before a judge and jury."

Her face was ghostly white as she listened, and she covered it with two trembling hands as he ceased.

"Oh, heavens!" she murmured, "what an awful responsibility I have drawn upon myself!" She bent her head, the face still concealed by her hands, and they waited patiently, and one of them most sympathetically, while she tried to think, and to regain her self-control.

Suddenly she lifted her head, and looked at them out of eyes that were stern and unwavering.

"I must seem very unreasonable," she said, in tones that were evidently controlled by pure force of will. "You are to *find* my husband's—murderer, and if you *must* drag him, or them, from beneath my very roof, so it must—be! And—I will not turn coward at the last, I will be the first to hear the truth, and to judge the offender! What do you want me to do, gentlemen?"

"Simply to let us go on to the end without further consultation. Believe me, it will be better so ; and to give us *carte blanche*, as I said before, in all things *here*, even to the point, if needful, of telling *you* to take Miss Rodney and go, upon any pretext you like, to Mr. Baird's for a day or two."

She turned with a swift gesture toward Ware.

"Doctor, is this, in your judgment, best for me?"

"It *is!*" replied Doctor Felix, earnestly.

"It was *his* suggestion," added Murtagh with a flitting smile.

She turned away her face, but they could see the red blood dye neck and cheek.

"All shall be as you direct," she said ; "is—is there anything *more?*"

"So little," said Murtagh, turning toward the door, "that we need not trouble you again, except by a suggestion now and then, until all

is done—the climax reached." He paused near the door, and his voice became almost gentle.

"Believe me, Mrs. Deering, I shall not act precipitately ; I think I know what your wishes would be, under certain circumstances. I am confident that all we may do will meet with your approval."

"I can trust you, I am sure of it," she replied, as she put out her hand to him. "And now—we must just wait—and bear the waiting as best we can !" and so they separated, and she neither proffered her hand nor any further farewell word to Felix Ware.

The next day Murtagh passed a long morning in Mr. Baird's library, closeted with John Redding. After luncheon, he drew Brenda out upon the balcony of the morning-room, where they could not be overheard.

"I ought to tell you," he said, "that, as an afterthought, and by the advice of Redding, we have sent for Mr. Ingram."

"And—ought you to tell me *why ?*"

"I will !—tell you why." He paused, having said this, and bent upon her a questioning look; he seemed to be taking a second thought.

She had been watching his face intently, and she now said :

"I see, you are trying to decide how much it is safe to tell me—or how much I will *bear*—I assure you I am stronger than you think ! A woman does not go through with such an experience as this of mine to come out the same; she must either break down and go mad, or she must find strength somewhere. I believe I *have* found strength ! My husband was a Christian, and the—the poisoner did not send him to some formless Nirvana ! *He* is beyond human hurt; and, I believe, still exists and is at peace. I know there is more to come, and worse —if that can be— It has been growing upon me, the belief that, behind all this mystery of death is some new horror, which will soon break upon us; and—I believe you anticipate it—and—are ready for it. Tell me what it seems best to tell—and no more. I have found strength to *endure*—and to *wait !*"

"Then," said Murtagh with decision, "you have found strength to learn why we want Mr. Ingram here ! We are so in the dark as to the motive for the two crimes—which, I feel sure, are closely linked together, that we are obliged to look at every possibility. Now, after hearing all the details of the reading of your husband's will, from you —and others—I am led to think that there is a deeper meaning behind his careful reticence than anyone has yet guessed. Mr. Ingram was his legal adviser for years— ?"

"Yes, many years."

"And we hope that, stored away in his memory, there may be something which he may recall, when he hears what we can now tell him; we hope for help from *him.*"

Brenda shook her head.

"I don't know," she said, doubtfully, "I believe I shared my husband's confidence in all things of moment."

"But—do you *know* why he made so strange a disposition of his affairs—his will ?"

"No," she replied, slowly shaking her head. "But—I am sure it was for some good and wise purpose.'

"So are we all! Ware, Redding, Liscom, Baird—myself. There is another thing, when you told me of that lost document, the one you were bidden to keep unopened for a certain time, and how Mr. Ingram, as you passed from the room, after hearing those instructions of your husband's read by the lawyer, hinted that there might be a *duplicate* paper. Now, Mrs. Deering, in view of all the facts, of all that has happened since those instructions were written, if a duplicate *does* exist, will you not allow it to be opened? It may contain the very link for which we are groping."

"You mean," she had drawn herself erect and was very pale. "*Do* you mean, will I open it, regardless of the instructions—the *wishes* of my husband, and *before* the events which alone could justify such an act, have occurred? Because—if you *do*—I must tell you that *nothing*, not even the clearing up of this mystery, could induce me to touch that paper, even if it or its duplicate were in my hands. It was a sacred trust from the dead, and as such, let come what will, it *shall not* be violated! If Mr. Ingram, as I hope and believe, *has* a duplicate of that paper, I *know* he will never let it pass from his own hand into any save mine."

"I am not disappointed," said Murtagh, after a moment's silence; "Ware told us you would never consent."

A fine colour flashed into her cheeks and quickly faded out again.

"Ah!" she murmured, "*he knows me*, then!"

CHAPTER LI.

ABOUT TO SPRING.

TOM WELLS was the ideal "nurse," for the word "keeper" was carefully banished from the apartment where Brook Deering now wandered by the hour from room to room, going sometimes about the upper halls, as well as through the grounds, in the cool of the early morning. He was very tractable, for the most part—only now and then developing a fit of stubbornness,—and he continued to fancy himself in his schoolboy days. At first he had not seemed to heed Sarita, save now and then, when he would address her as Bruce, or by the name of someone of his old tutors; but, of late, he had turned against her, and, instead of allowing her to sit in his room, and wait on him, in his languid moods, he now manifested a distaste for her presence, and, in his worst moods, would not have her in the room; always bestowing upon her the name of some obnoxious personage. At his best he simply ignored her; and Sarita made moan in the kitchen because her Master Brook, whom she had "nursed and tended since his babyhood," had forgotten her utterly; and she went about with a woeful countenance, and was almost as restless as Brook himself.

But for the doctor's watchful care, combined with certain sleeping draughts, she would have been a nightly visitor to the attic above, and the tenantless room on the bedroom floor, during these nights of unrest and mental disquiet; for it was no small trouble that was dimming the

brightness of Sarita's small, keen eyes, and making hollows in cheeks already sufficiently thin. If her young master's condition was *not* the cause of her anxiety, then, surely, there was another cause ; *sufficient* if unknown.

But now Sarita's anxieties were but as a drop in the sea of trouble encompassing the household at Beechwood.

Above stairs, and below, the inmates moved about with grave, sorrowful, or abstracted faces; for the weeks had run their length, and now there were only a few days to intervene before the opening of Court, and the calling, upon the second day, of the "Matchin Murder Case."

As the time drew so near, popular interest, which had cooled somewhat, but had never died out, came up to fever-heat again; and Brenda and Valentine returned from a Saturday morning drive through Pomfret, fully convinced that the most irksome solitude was better than running that gauntlet of staring eyes, pointing fingers, and half-heard comments—not to mention the loud-mouthed and open attentions of a running cavalcade of small boys,—and determined that nothing should take them again outside their own gates, until Bruce Deering's "case" —with its unguessed and unguessable results, had passed out of the public mind.

As for Bruce himself, he went and came as usual ; and the stern dignity of his face and bearing was never once relaxed in passing to and fro, and more than one word of comment, or coarse jeer, was held in check by the single brief, cold glance of the eyes which met every gaze with the same keen, momentary challenge. At home he was, as usual, grave, reticent, and less and less inclined to linger among the others in morning-room, dining or drawing-room. One thing noted by more than one of the observant, was, that he seemed to shun any meeting with Valentine Rodney, and to do it, as the time for his trial drew daily nearer, almost openly.

Not that the high-spirited girl sought him, at any time ; she, too, seemed preoccupied, and at first, did not seem to realise that he tried to avoid her; when at last this became apparent, however, he found all further effort unnecessary. Not only did Valentine avoid him, but she did it so deftly that it could not seem a slight, and quite put his cruder masculine methods to shame.

On one of these occasions—when she had cleverly avoided an encounter upon the stairs by turning quickly into the west hall, with the intention of gaining the little stairway near Murtagh's door, and so reaching the lower floor—she encountered Doctor Ware, face to face, and was called to a halt by him.

"One moment, Miss Rodney," he said, smiling, yet evidently in earnest. "Thus far you have escaped me, but I have had my eye upon you for some time, and I see that this high pressure, under which we are all living, is having its effect upon you. Tell me, please, do you sleep well?"

He was gazing intently down into the *mignonne* face, which had lost some of its rich colouring ; at the small mouth, with the pathetic droop at the corners, which was so often there of late, and at the dusky shadows beneath the big, dark eyes; which, in spite of their

brilliancy, of late often looked as if they were keeping back the tears.

"You know," he went on gently, "how *much* Mrs. Deering relies upon you for comfort and cheer. We cannot have *you* breaking down; and you have had much, too much, to shock, and torture, sensitive nerves. Believe me, if I did not see 'symptoms,' which *should not* be ignored, I would not have troubled you now."

She had started and flushed at his first words, but she listened quietly to the rest, and answered quickly:

"Doctor, you are very good! I think that I *am* somewhat nervous, as you say; so much has happened—and is happening!" She turned her glance toward Brook's door. "I do not sleep very well, and I think I have had one or two very little chills. Do you think I have made out a case for you?"

He put out his finger, and touched her wrist, where the pulse was throbbing unsteadily. "I will be entirely candid," he said. "If you keep on like this, you will find that you *have* '*nerves*,' a great many of them. In your present condition it would take very little to break down your self-poise utterly; even your strong will—for you have a strong will—could not sustain you through much—now. May I come to your boudoir in, say, half an hour, and ask you a few more questions, before prescribing for you?"

Someone was coming down the long hall, and she murmured an assent, and flitted away. The doctor stood still a moment, and then, following in her footstep, opened the door of Murtagh's room, and entered.

The detective had given him the now familiar signal at the breakfast table, half an hour since, and was waiting for him, sitting at an open window, behind half-drawn fluttering curtains.

"Good," Murtagh began as the other pulled up a chair, just opposite, and close to him. "I couldn't have waited long! I've been bursting with impatience. Did you hear anything uncanny last night?"

"Nothing—unless you count Brook Deering's ravings uncanny! He was very talkative last night."

"No. It was not that. *She* was here—in the grounds, I mean!"

"She?"

"Miss Wardell. My boy reported at daybreak. I found him at the end of the park. Miss W—— was in the grounds last night, and she gave the signal. It was about eleven o'clock, and you might have heard it, and thought it one of the grooms, whistling just half-a-dozen notes of a popular song. A good many windows were open about the house, and—she was answered promptly."

"Ah!" Ware started, but restrained himself, only saying: "Do you know the meaning of the calls?"

"I can guess. She will be here again to-night."

"And—shall you permit the interview?"

"No. I shall attend at the trysting-place *in person;* and I shall leave it to you—and Wells, to see that *no one* else leaves the house to-night."

. . . . . .

The doctor's visit to Valentine in her boudoir was very brief and business-like ; and, when he was about to leave, he gave a swift glance about him, and lowered his voice.

"Is anyone within hearing?"

She flushed slightly. "Mrs. Merton is in my dressing-room," she said.

He smiled. Mrs. Merton's partial deafness was very convenient to him, but he still spoke in a half-whisper :

"I am charged with a message from '*Mr. Holly.*' Of course *you* know that *I*, also, am a confederate of his?"

"Yes," with a touch of reserve.

"He thinks it important that Madam Sarita should not leave the house after dark to-night, and asks that you will aid him, in any way you best can, in keeping her in view, or, at least, making it difficult for her to leave the house unnoticed."

"Is that all?"

"That is all." Something like a look of relief crossed her face, and she lifted her head and smiled slightly.

"I will do my best—but—if it were possible—I should advise that you lock her in her room the first time she is seen to enter it,—or, give her a sleeping draught. I have great faith in Sarita's cunning. If she wishes to get out—to-night, nothing short of detention by force will keep her in."

The doctor's eyes lighted up, and his mobile face expressed a sudden determination.

"Miss Rodney, you are wiser than the two of us! We *had* intended to rely upon surveillance ; but your advice is too good—your method too easy to be abandoned."

At the first opportunity he was again in conference with Murtagh.

"It *would* simplify matters!" the detective mused, when he had heard Ware's report, and Miss Rodney's suggestion. "It would make things easy for *us*. And, if *I* succeed, the other proof will not be needed." He considered a moment. "I *must* succeed!" he exclaimed with energy, "everything hinges upon *to-night*. And—if I *should* fail, the other proof will be of little value after all—now."

"Precisely," agreed Ware, laconically.

"But the doses—can you manage them?"

"Easily! I shall exchange Sarita's medicine this afternoon."

"And the other?"

"Trust me, the other will make no effort to go abroad to-night."

CHAPTER LII.

AT BAY.

AT nine o'clock, there were lights in the drawing-room at Beechwood, but its only occupants were Brenda Deering and "Uncle Holly." She, pale and preoccupied, although unaware of the mine about to be sprung so near her ; he looking as comfortable and unconcerned

as if he had no thought beyond the present quiet hour, and his comfortable pillow in the hour to come.

Valentine had been informed that there would be no occasion for her vigilance; but, while she did not know the nature of the event about to happen, she knew that *something* was in the air, and she was too restless—and—yes—too nervous, to remain in the drawing-room, or, indeed, anywhere, for many moments together.

At ten o'clock, the lights were out in the drawing-room. Uncle Holly had discovered, before that time, how very weary Brenda seemed, and there was no prospect of an addition to their number. Bruce, who had passed the previous night in his cousin's room, having retired to his own shortly after dinner, and the doctor being "upon duty" near the invalid for the evening.

"It may be for the night as well," Ware had said, upon leaving the others shortly after dinner. "I want to watch the symptoms very closely just now, and if he is restless, I shall remain awake," and he did, wide awake and observant, until the first streak of day dawn.

And now it is eleven o'clock, and the house is still. Here and there, through some window of the upper floor, the beams of a lamp, burning low and softly shaded, gleam dimly through half-closed shutters or flowing curtains, for the women of this sorrow-haunted house are not in love with darkness.

The house is still; the doors are fast locked; and nothing stirs unless, it may be, in Brook Deering's apartment, where, in the dressing-room and chamber beyond, lamps are burning, softly shaded like the others, but not so dimly. The windows are open to admit the faint night breezes, and the rooms are still, for upon a couch in the dressing-room is Tom Wells fast asleep; and another form lies upon the bed, breathing slowly, regularly.

As midnight approached, the solitary watcher over these two sleepers begins to move about the room as if restless, his shadow now and then dimly outlined against one of the windows; once or twice he goes to the south window facing the garden, and, half hidden by the flowing curtains, stands peering out.

There is no moon, and some fleecy clouds glide across the sky to westward; there is a faint stirring among the tree tops, and as midnight draws near, and the watcher goes again to the window, the low, soft call of some night bird breaks the summer stillness. As he turns away, a moment later, the sound is repeated close at hand.

The watcher turns to look at the sleeper on the bed. Then he glances at Tom Wells, and smiles as he moves away. Five minutes later the lamps in both rooms are burning low, the curtains are drawn close, and no more shadows appear at either window.

Hardly ten minutes have passed since the lights grew dim at Brook Deering's windows, and the shadows vanished; and now from the darkness of the balcony above the library entrance a form emerges, and moves, slowly but with assured steps, straight toward the clump of bushes, near which Murtagh had hurled his boots at the *cats*, and beyond them, stopping near a tall oak tree midway between the house and the park palings. The figure is draped from head to foot in a cloak, which quite conceals the sex of its wearer, who stands an instant

peering into the darkness beneath the tree and then utters a sound, so slight as to be inaudible a few feet away, a sound like the soft chirp of some small and sleepy bird.

Instantly almost, a second shadowy form comes toward the first from beneath the oak—comes quickly and close; and there is the faintest whisper.

"*Sarita?*"

"No."

There is a quick catching of the breath, and the waiting figure moves closer, and puts out two hands, which brush aside the loose cloak and clutch at the sleeve of a masculine coat.

"BROOK!" catching at the unseen hand. "How—why!—Thank God, you are *yourself* once more!—tell me—"

"Hush," whispers the other, "we cannot talk *here;* it is not safe. Did you come by the creek? Did you *drive?*"

"Yes."

"Then go back; I will follow you; we must have a long talk."

"Go where?"

"To your phæton; it's the only way; and not so risky as *this.* Hark!" he listens a moment, and then whispering "go on," pushes her gently before him down a path which both seem to know.

Arrived at the park fence, they go through a little gate, and then, he following as before, they cross a corner of the park; here there is an improvised stile, over which she goes easily and without hesitation, and he, after exploring with his hands, for the shade is dense here, follows her. They hurry on down a path which must be familiar, for it is scarcely discernible except by the opening in the foliage above their heads. They cross the little footbridge, where Jonas Wiggins and Tom Wells began their duel of wits, which was not yet ended; and a moment later she halts where the trees stand thick, and where, a little out of the seldom-travelled wagon track, a road wagon and stout horse is tethered.

"*You* must not remove your cloak," she whispers. "I will drive," and quickly and easily she unties the high-headed animal, and has him out in the road, the wheels working noiselessly, the horse's feet muffled in soft felt hoof bags.

As they take their places, she stands erect in the wagon and lets the concealing cloak slip from her shoulders, revealing herself dressed in masculine attire down, or up to the soft felt hat, which she takes from beneath the seat, and fits it upon her head. If he could see her face he would know that she was flushing hotly, and as she resumed her seat, and took the reins from his hand, he was aware that she was trembling violently.

"You see," she whispered, as they began to move slowly through the dark strip of woods, "it has come to *this;* after that night when that terrible man threw the shoes, I resolved to protect myself in any and all possible ways! If I must be caught, I decided it would make matters no worse to be caught *en masquerade;* in fact," and again he felt her shudder, "*nothing* would matter—if we were *caught!*"

"Softly!" he whispered; "we must not say too much—*here.*"

"No. But *can't* you tell me something more about your illness? I know so little! only what Sarita said—"

"And—what did *she* say?—tell me."

"Not much, of course; the chances were so few."

"Did she tell you that I meant to try *this?*"

"To go home with *me?* No; only that you were not so ill as rumour made you—and that you would make a great effort to evade them all—soon. Tell me, how *did* you manage? and—am I to take you back?"

"*Would* you?"

"You *know* it, Brook! But you?—she said someone slept in your room all night."

"True enough; someone does sleep there. It's surprising how quickly a good round bribe will put a watcher to sleep, and how long he will remain asleep!"

"Oh—and was it William?"

"No, William serves by day. It is Tom Wells to-night."

"Oh!" she checked the sharp little exclamation. "Brook, I don't *like* that man! Every time I meet him he seems to look at me so—so strangely!—not staring—only a glance, but *such* a glance! I am half afraid of him! You know—I told you about—that meeting?"

"Yes."

"And—Sarita? suppose someone should see *her* downstairs, or about the halls?"

"They will not; Sarita is very clever."

"Oh!—but I must stop talking, we are out of the woods. Now I shall drive swiftly until we reach the corner."

"One moment—this horse? What will you do with him?"

"Mrs. Fram—Brook, I *never could* have managed without that woman! she will do *anything* for me—and money! I couldn't risk taking one of my own horses again, so Mrs. Fram sent to a stable for this animal—for *her own use*, this evening. The stable people suppose she will be driven by one of our servants; *our* people fancy that the *stable* supplies driver as well as horse. When we reach the corner—it's only two blocks from the church, you know—we will get out, tie the horse at the front, and ring the stable bell. The night officer, luckily, is upstairs, and *we* can be around the corner and a block away before the door is opened." She had checked her horse at the end of the wood road, while she made this explanation, and she now started it on again with a shake of the reins, then pausing again, "But you—I quite forgot, I must *keep* the horse! I will drive it beneath my carriage shed."

"Very well," he assents; "let us hasten, time is precious, and I have much to say."

"And I—" she checks herself and urges on the silent stepping horse.

They arrive in safety. The swinging gate opens for them like an enchanted postern of old, and the horse goes quietly into the empty carriage shed.

He follows her cautiously up the smooth path to a side door, which opens silently, and down a dimly-lighted hall; as they pass a half-open

door, it suddenly swings inward, an old woman confronts them for a half second, and, at a wave of the hand, disappears again, closing the door tightly.

"Brook," murmurs Ora, "I am going to take you up to my den," she says, still preceding him. "It's too warm for the library, with closed windows; and the den, you know, is a nook by itself; all the servants sleep in the other wing, and Mrs. Fram is downstairs."

At the door of the den she pauses, having thrown it open; this upper hall, like the other, is but dimly lighted. He still wears his shrouding cloak; she had removed hers, upon stepping from the wagon.

"Go in," she says, pushing the door open, "and, will you pardon the darkness, until I come back? It will be very soon."

As he enters, she flits away, and while he gropes for a seat, he smiles, knowing well that her haste, and the darkness, are because of the masculine disguise, which she evidently wears with disrelish.

She is back sooner than he had thought it possible; and he hears the swish of soft trailing skirts as she crosses the room, having closed the door, regardless of the darkness.

Then there is a snap and a flash, another, and another; and the room is filled with soft radiance from a swinging chandelier. He rises to his feet, taking in, at one swift glance, the lovely room, bower, rather than den, fitted with the gorgeous colouring fabrics so becoming and so suited to the splendid brunette beauty of its mistress.

And she, Ora Wardell! for a moment she stands before him, her eyes uplifted toward the glittering chandelier, and he notes her full graceful figure, the charming curves of her fine neck and throat, the perfect profile; and then she turns toward him, her dark eyes gleaming, the rich colour coming and going in cheek and lip; the white hand outstretched; the soft sheen of the vivid, rose-bud *negligé* gleaming as she sweeps toward him.

He has risen now, and he stands before her, still muffled in the concealing cloak, and with his hat pulled low upon his brows.

"*Brook!—ah—h—h!*"

The cloak has fallen, the hat is removed with a gesture of perfect respect, and Ferriss Murtagh and Ora Wardell are face to face. She, with one white hand pressed against her breast, facing him there, mute, amazed, but without one visible shadow of fear.

"Do not be alarmed, Miss Wardell! I am not a burglar—I am a detective."

"A—*detective!*"

"A detective. Engaged in ferreting out *two murders* here in Pomfret. I have been here, in the town, since the murder of Joe Matchin, and I have found it necessary to learn and to see something of *you*. Will you allow me to sit down, and will you also sit, and hear what I have to say? I assure you I am not your enemy! In fact, I very much wish to be your *friend;* at any rate, I hope I am a man of honour. I may as well add that I know all about your connection with Joe Matchin's unfortunate slayer, from the moment when, for friendship's sake, you concealed that person, first, in your own grounds, and then in St. Mark's Church; and,—later, transferred him to Beechwood and the care of his former nurse, who, like yourself, proved his true friend. I

know of your meetings in the grounds of Beechwood—in fact, I know —*everything!*"

"*Everything?*" If her first thought had been to order him from her presence she no longer harbours it. The blaze of anger which had flashed up into her face at his first words has faded, leaving her pallid, and, while her voice is controlled, and slightly scornful, she is experiencing an actual panic of terror; not for herself, but for the man in whose cause she has jeopardised herself. Suddenly she turns and, seating herself upon a low, broad chair, motions him to another opposite; and while he draws it nearer, and seats himself, she determines upon her course of action as best she may.

"I will not waste my time, nor yours, in comments upon your manner of forcing yourself into my presence. A detective, it seems to me, might easily have introduced himself into my house in a *simpler* and less sensational manner. Since you *are* here, be so good as to tell me *why* you have chosen this time and way?"

"Thank you, Miss Wardell; your good sense and business-like methods will, I perceive, simplify matters much for both of us. I *might* have appeared in your drawing-room as an orthodox caller, but time, just now, is of value, and I felt sure that *this* was the quickest way of gaining your,—shall we say, confidence—?"

Her lip is curled contemptuously. "It *sounds* well," she comments —bitterly.

"Yes. Now, let us come to the point at once; you observe that I ask nothing of you in advance, in exchange for *my* confidence; I intend to lose no time in laying my cards upon the table open to your inspection."

"One moment. Suppose you fail to receive a return in kind?"

He smiled.

"Or—I might betray your confidence—"

"To whom?"

"To—the parties most interested."

"The parties *most* interested are Brook and Bruce Deering. To *which* would you—perhaps—betray me?"

She frowns. "To both, perhaps."

"Pardon me. I should prefer *not* to say unpleasant things. But—it rests with *me* whether, after to-night, you are permitted to *see* either Bruce or Brook Deering."

"What do you mean?" She half rises from her seat, and then sinks back again, holding herself with an iron grip.

"Simply this, Miss Wardell. While I have no mind to accuse *you* of anything, save a willingness to assist a friend in trouble, others might describe what you have done in harsher terms. And—it depends upon the result of this interview whether I go from your house your ally, or a man compelled by a stern sense of duty to arrest *Brook* Deering, order Bruce Deering into confinement, and take out a warrant for *your* arrest, as an accessory before the fact, in *the murder of Joe Matchin.*"

"An accessory—*I?*"

"Allow me to explain myself. On the day after Joe Matchin's murder, I was called to Pomfret to investigate the case; I cannot now

go into details, but I have spent a lifetime in such work, and, after hearing all that could be told—all that was known—I began to look about. The sudden and complete disappearance of the murderer was very puzzling, to me, as well as to others,—and I very soon decided that *he went into instant hiding,—he* or *they.*"

She starts, and can barely suppress a sharp cry, but Murtagh goes calmly on: "The *first person* who struck me as worthy of suspicion, Miss Wardell, was—yourself; and that before I had so much as seen your face." And, while she sat staring, and listening, as one fascinated, he told the story of the inquest, and of her encounter with Tom Wells.

"After hearing the man's story," he went on, "you became an object of interest to me, and I never lost sight of you, for long."

"But why?" she breaks in. "What did I do to cause you to suspect *me?*"

"Ah, you never dreamed that we *could* suspect Miss Wardell, did you? But a detective soon learns not to be a respecter of—persons, and the fact that you were an aristocratic young lady, who might easily have sent a servant to inquire into the disturbance, and so late, too, was enough to set me thinking. Next, while the inquest was in progress, you *drove out*—an easy way to avoid a summons as witness, to tell what you could about the *footsteps* which, according to Wells, you had heard running past the house,—and the horseman who rode away down the avenue a moment later. These were *first clues*, and not to be neglected by an experienced sleuth—"

"Sleuth indeed!" she mutters.

He smiles, and goes on as before. "Next came your call upon the coroner, and Sheriff Carton, *after* you had driven to Beechwood to leave a message with Madam Sarita!"

"Good heavens!"

"And next, came your meeting with Madam Sarita, on the day before the Deerings came back from New York; you were mounted—she driving; and you once more slipped a note into her hand. Next, you visited New York, called away, according to Miss Rodney, by the illness of a friend. On that occasion I accompanied you, not far in the rear; you had business with a certain Frenchwoman there."

Ora is lying back in her chair now; her hands are clenched in her lap, and her teeth are clenched over her white lips.

"You see," he continued, "I was making fair progress, and you might have made my acquaintance much sooner but for a singular circumstance which puzzles me somewhat even yet. I was employed, you must know, by the friends of Bruce Deering, who, one and all, believed in him, and were bent upon proving him innocent. In spite of myself I began to feel an interest in the young fellow, and was upon the point of calling upon *you*—to get—if possible—your testimony, for or against him, when, suddenly, I was sent for by the uncle of the accused—Lysander Deering—and requested to *drop the investigation.*"

"What!"

"Does it surprise you? It did me! But Mr. Bruce Deering acquiesced in the matter, and even Mr. Baird and Lawyer Redding

seemed to agree that the case should be dropped. It was dropped accordingly, and I went back to the city."

"And—it was re-opened—later?" she is leaning forward now, evidently she is hearing something quite new to her, and, for some reason, most interesting.

"Not—in the way you evidently suppose. The next time I heard from Pomfret, there was *another* murder to investigate; I was called back by Mr. Baird to find out, if I could, *who* poisoned Lysander Deering of Beechwood."

"WHAT!" it is almost a scream; every vestige of her self-control seems gone. "You are—*practising* upon me!"

"Upon my word *no!* I am anything but a practical joker. The matter has been kept secret from everyone except the family; even the servants are ignorant of the truth. Lysander Deering died by *poison*, and, Miss Wardell, after serious thought and some hesitation, I have decided to appeal to *you*. *Can* you refuse to tell me the truth about Joe Matchin's death, when I tell you that, beyond a reasonable doubt, *both* crimes were committed *by the same hand?*"

She is on her feet now, flinging out her arms, and wringing her hands like a creature tortured beyond endurance; she is terribly agitated. Murtagh also rises. It is the tug of war.

"Tell me," she gasps, and there is a smouldering fire in her dark eyes; "do *you*, does *any* one suspect—"

"Why, assuredly; we only ask for your confirmation; and I would be glad if it was your vindication too."

She comes closer, and grasps his arm with a strong, nervous hand. "Tell me," she demands, ignoring his reference to herself; "tell me, what shall you do if I refuse to speak?"

His answer came quick and stern.

"*Make, at least, three arrests at once!*"

"Whom—*whom*—?"

"*Brook* Deering—*Sarita*—*yourself.*"

"*Brook!* Do you mean—do you accuse *him?*"

"He was in your house on the night of the Matchin murder; he spent a week or more in the church. He was concealed in the attic by Sarita. Can you deny it?"

"And *Bruce Deering?*" she fairly clinches the arm she still grasps; "*what is he in your eyes?*"

"A victim, a *scapegoat*, or so it now appears to some of us."

She flings his arm from her, and her dark face fairly flames. "Sit down again," she cries; "*I* am going to tell you *the truth.*"

CHAPTER LIII.

ORA'S CONFESSION.

"I AM under a solemn promise," Ora began, when, after some moments of agitated pacing up and down, she at last calmed herself, with an effort, and resumed her place opposite the detective, "not to

reveal what I am now about to tell you. But I *cannot* sit here silent, while the man, who has sacrificed *so much* to screen an ingrate, is calumniated; accused of the most unnatural of crimes, and is no longer able to defend himself, if he would; knowing what I *now* know, it is no longer strange—to *me*—that Brook Deering has lost his reason! How could he retain it and *live?*"

She turned toward him suddenly. "Tell me!" she demanded, "have I known all the truth? I have been told that Brook Deering was 'temporarily insane,' *made* so by the troubles that have overwhelmed him since the first hour of his return to his home; and I was led to think that his recovery was almost accomplished, that I might even *see* him to-night—*you* saw *that?*"

"Yes," assented Murtagh, "I understood."

"*What* did you understand? *Is* Brook Deering still afflicted? Is he not his own master?"

"Miss Wardell—if Brook Deering were able to be interviewed, or to speak for himself, be assured I should have applied to *him* rather than to you! Believe me, if you are a friend to Brook Deering, or his cousin—"

"His *cousin!*" her eyes flashed fire.

"His cousin; yes. If you are a friend to either you cannot serve them better *now*, than by telling me the *truth* about past events. Understand me, I am not bent upon dragging all the facts into court, and it is only when you have refused me your help, and so driven me to extreme measures, that I shall turn to the *law*, and place my knowledge before a judge and jury! And if *that* happens, Miss Wardell, *you* will not be overlooked a second time. *Bruce* Deering has strong friends, who will move heaven and earth to clear him of this charge; but they do not court publicity, *if it can be avoided*—"

"*Bruce* Deering!—*his* warm friends! Man, what do you mean?"

"Simply, that there are those who believe in him—who mean to see him freed from the accusation of murder."

"Ah!" her voice was almost a hiss; her eyes were burning, her brow bent and wrathful, "and—*you* are employed by these—*friends?*"

"Yes. I told you, remember, that I was prepared to play an open game. I am employed by Bruce Deering's friends."

"And these are—Brenda Deering?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Baird?"

"Yes—and others."

"Ah—of *course!* Valentine Rodney too?"

"Yes—I believe she is also his friend."

"Indeed!—and *whom*, then, do they *accuse?*—these friends who 'believe' in Bruce Deering?" her lips curled as the question fell from them. Her face was a mirror of contending emotions.

"Can you ask? When they know *who* it was that lay concealed in St. Mark's and at Beechwood *until—the night of the railway disaster at the east embankment.*"

"What! Do they—those women—*do they* think it was *Brook* Deering who struck that blow in Pomfret Bank? Do *you?*"

"Was it not he?"

She clenched her slim hands, and fairly writhed with the intensity of the strong emotions that swayed her.

"My God!" she cried. "And this awful wrong might have been perpetrated, and *I* left in ignorance! Oh! you thought to find it easy, with Brook Deering broken with a grief and shame not his own, to *remove* the guilt from the shoulders which shall *bear it* from this moment, and cast it upon a defenceless man! You would save Bruce Deering by accusing *Brook!* BROOK who has *sacrificed* himself to screen a proud family from disgrace, and to serve and *save* a false friend!"

She checked her fiery speech, and, for some moments, remained sitting erect before him, struggling mightily to regain her self-control; and, after a time, in a measure, it seemed accomplished. She drew a long sighing breath, unclasped the clenched and too expressive hands, and drew back in her chair, letting her head rest against the soft cushions.

"Listen," she said, in a low intense tone, evidently held down and controlled by a powerful will, mightily exerted, "*Brook Deering* is guilty of *nothing* save too great loyalty to his childhood's friend. *Bruce Deering is the murderer!*"

He moved slightly, and bent his head to conceal the smile hovering about his lips. He was inwardly triumphant, for he had led this haughty woman on—playing upon her feelings, affections, hopes, jealousies, and fears, like a skilful harpist upon his strings—and now he had only to restrain himself and listen, and this unsafe, dangerous throw was won.

"That there may be no more 'mistakes,' no room for doubt," she resumed, "I will go back to the beginning of the matter, and you will see that I can match frankness with frankness! Brook Deering and I have been friends since childhood. I have known Bruce Deering just as long, but there was never any sympathy, any comradeship between us. As a lad, he was stiff, awkward, and serious, where Brook was bright, gay, and companionable. In their student days it was the same; only as he grew older, became a man, in fact, Bruce seemed to care not at all for the society of *his own class*, and was taciturn and self-absorbed to a degree. About this time there began to be occasional whispers concerning Bruce which were not all to his credit, and once I ventured, when Brook was praising his cousin, in whom he had the greatest confidence, to hint at a certain rumour which coupled Bruce's name with that of a certain young girl, quite below him in station, but accounted one of the beauties of the village—"

"One moment," interrupted Murtagh, quietly, "was this girl called Rose Matchin?"

"I see you have heard something of that! I am glad, for it will help you to understand, *and believe* what is to come. As I have said, I had alluded, as best I could, to this rumour, when Brook at once took up the cudgel in his cousin's defence, and would hear no word against him. It was always so; Brook was a more than generous friend. Well—the time passed, and the two young men went from home, first to college, and then to the law school; and not long after

this last departure, Rose Matchin vanished one day, and has never been seen in Pomfret since. Of course, there was much talk, and once I ventured—Brook and I were correspondents—to hint once more at the talk about the girl. His reply was evasive. He would not speak *against* his cousin, and, I suppose, he *could* not honestly say much *for* him. He begged me not to allude to the subject again, and it was not long before I was convinced, although he continued to speak now and then of his cousin, and always with kindness, that there was a breach in their friendship. Accidentally it came out that they were not living together, as they had always done before, and before long, Brook left the city, came home for a time, and finally went abroad; Bruce, in the meantime, finishing his course in the city and returning home to enter into partnership, as junior partner, of course, with Messrs. Redding and Morse."

She stopped and was silent for a few moments.

"I must not prolong my story," she resumed. "Brook and I had continued to be friends, and were looked upon by many as lovers. But we were not betrothed at the time of his departure for Europe, and, in fact, a sort of coldness had sprung up between us, due *mostly* to my high temper, and a little to his genial thoughtlessness first—and to his proud sensitiveness later. After my father's death I went abroad with some friends. I had travelled upon the Continent with my father, who was even then an invalid, and was eager to see it again, and more extensively. In Paris we met—Brook and I, and renewed our friendship. He followed our party to Italy, and we saw much of each other. In fact, we became betrothed." A wave of rich colour swept across her cheeks. She uttered these last words in a softened reminiscent tone. "Gradually he let me into his confidence. He was still in communication with his cousin, Bruce, and was much distressed by his *liaison*. He feared that his father would learn the truth concerning Bruce, and also feared that the girl's uncle might make the secret known, as Bruce believed—although she denied the fact—that the girl had let her uncle into the secret, in part, at least. While Brook was thus troubled for his worthless cousin, to whom he still clung, he learned of his father's illness—and then as he was upon the point of setting out for home in haste, came a letter from his cousin, telling him that his father was *quite well* again."

"That must have been Mr. Deering's first illness."

"It was, as I learned afterwards, for I came home very soon after our parting upon the Riviera. And now," she said, with a quick catch of the breath, "I come to that terrible time, and I *cannot* dwell upon it."

"As you will," he murmured.

"One day I received a letter from Brook. He had grown anxious once more on his father's account, and had crossed hurriedly to New York, in company with a friend, and so suddenly that he had been unable to notify his people. In New York he had chanced to meet, upon the street near one of the theatres, *that girl*, and he must have been in a state of agitation to have written me so frankly as he did.—The girl was growing anxious and impatient, and was talking angrily of returning to Pomfret, in pursuit of her lover, when Brook met her

He had been upon the point of wiring to his father's wife, that his home-coming might not be too great a surprise to his father—but this meeting changed his plans. Bruce was in danger of being exposed, and his friends, as well as himself, disgraced. The girl, he said, had grown to love money, and a city life, and it was by giving her all the money he had with him, a considerable sum, that he prevailed upon her to wait in the city and let *him* deal with Bruce, in her behalf. It was not the *first* time that Brook had shared his generous allowance with his profligate cousin. Well, this letter was an appeal to ME. He *must* see Bruce before he went home, must see him *at once!* He would come to Pomfret by a train which would land him some three miles from town, at early dusk; and he would walk across the fields, and so enter town after dark, and unseen. He would send, by the mail which brought *my* letter, a warning to Bruce, and he would *come* directly to *me*"—here again the warm red dyed her cheeks, and her dark eyes softened, "and when it was later he would go to see Bruce in his down-town rooms, and remain there until morning."

She paused again, and all the blood went out of her face.

"Shall I *ever* forget that night?" she moaned, closing her eyes, and shutting her palms tightly, while her breast heaved and her breath came and went quickly. "He came, and no one had seen him, he said. It was nearly nine o'clock when he reached here, for he had loitered, not wishing to arrive until after the dinner hour; and I told him, as I had heard, that there was a bachelors' supper at a certain house upon the hill, and that Bruce was, of course, one of the guests. I had the library well lighted, and the curtains partly drawn, but I brought Brook at once to this room. No one saw him come, for I was in the grounds when he entered them, and I brought him in myself. Two or three times during the evening, I went down to the library and moved about, passed the windows, or sat, for a moment or two, near the big chandelier in the middle of the room; for he did not want the servants to know he was with me—nor did I, of course.

"It must have been almost midnight when he left me, thinking he would try and meet Bruce on his return from the hill—"

Again she caught her breath and clenched her trembling hands.

"I don't know how long he had been gone. I had no thought of sleep, but lingered in the library, moving about restlessly, and thinking how much Brook had done, and was still doing, for his recreant cousin, until, finally, I went through the little morning-room adjoining the library and stepped out upon the balcony through the open window. The morning-room was unlighted; and, while the place where I stood was in complete darkness, not six feet away from me the light from the nearest library window streamed out and across the lawn.

"Standing there a few moments, I found myself growing chilly in the night air, and was about to go in, when I fancied I heard a slight sound in the direction of the bank, or the church. I stopped to listen, and became almost certain that someone was coming through the grounds. At that moment I saw, on the belt of light from the library window, a shadow. It looked like the shadow of a human head, appearing and disappearing instantly, as if someone had ventured

too near the light and suddenly drawn back. Before I could check myself I had uttered a faint 'Oh!' It was scarcely above my breath, but it was answered at once; just as faintly, but distinct enough. '*Ora!*' that was all, but I knew *at once* that it was Brook, and in another instant, I had breathed, '*Come here—the balcony.*' He was there in a moment, and quite noiselessly. '*For God's sake,*' he whispered, '*let me in!—hide—me, Ora!* A *terrible thing* has happened!' 'Come!' I said, and, in one instant almost, I had stooped down and caught his hand, and by my aid he had climbed the balcony rails. A moment later we were in the dark morning-room, and he was whispering in my ear how he had reached the bank, after walking about a little, just in time to witness what he feared was a murder, and to grapple with the assassin in such a way, he feared, as to receive some marks of the affray. The man had escaped, and *he* must not be known as a witness; it might make him endless trouble. There—the *worst* is out! You *know* the rest. There was a big cabinet across a corner of the room, and I pulled it away and made him stand behind it, while I went out and reconnoitred, as Tom Wells testified.

"All that night, and all the next day, I kept that man concealed *in this very room!* You see it is a corner room, quite isolated, with no porches or balconies, and with but *one door*, of which I kept the key."

"My soul!" ejaculated the detective, "but your grit and courage were wonderful! And so, when you drove past the place of inquest—and out to deliver the note to Sarita—you left a prisoner in this room?"

"Yes. And the note was to enlighten Sarita—and call upon her for assistance. When Brook learned that his people were absent, and the house almost deserted, he thought he would try and get into the mansard. But the search was so close it was not safe for us to remove him, and then I chanced to think of the church, and the next night took him there and into the gallery closet."

"And the *murder?* how did he explain *that?*"

"How? Surely you *know!* Brook's letter must have disturbed Bruce so that he felt forced into some sort of prompt action; as nearly as Brook could comprehend; then his cousin must have arranged with Matchin to meet him after the supper. But unknown to him—Bruce—the old man must have received the letter from his niece, which enlightened him, and enraged him so that when they met there was a scene; of course no one will ever know just *how* it began. But when Brook, after going to his cousin's rooms, and finding them in darkness, turned toward the hill—in the hope of meeting him on his return, he was amazed to see that a light was burning in the bank. Wondering at this, he approached a window, and drew himself up by his hands. Through the merest crack in the curtains, he was able to see his cousin—and the old man,—engaged in a struggle,—and, dropping to the ground, he ran around to the door.—Ah! how hard it is to tell the awful truth!—Running to the entrance he came full against the murderer—fleeing—"

"Fleeing?"

"*I* say fleeing,—but the man who could so sacrifice himself, could hardly be the man to so explain, or describe, such an encounter. They

must have recognised each other, of course,—but grappled, perhaps, *before* that recognition ; for the garments in which Brook came to me were *smeared with blood!*"

"Oh," quickly. "What became of those garments?"

"They were burned,—by my own hands."

"Miss Wardell, you are the 'one woman in a thousand!' I pray, if I ever find myself in trouble, that I may have a friend as brave and strong as you!"

She sighed wearily, not heeding the implied flattery.

"Have I told you enough?" she asked. "Surely the rest is plain to you."

"A few more questions, please. We must be very *sure*, very *clear*, in order to be just, and not to blunder, or make needless trouble. You fully believe, then—that it *was* Bruce Deering who killed Joe Matchin?"

"Fully! who else *could* have done it?"

"True. And the *motive?* Your friend must have explained that to you in full, or you would never have given him your aid and sympathy?"

"It was clear enough! Only *too* clear. Bruce Deering was threatened with exposure ; *Brook's* letter had warned him of this, and the *other* letter brought about the climax. Bruce was, in a measure, dependant upon his uncle. He had squandered his small fortune, almost, and he was scheming to recoup by making a good marriage—a marriage in which he would need his uncle's aid and countenance. His secret must be kept from his uncle at all hazards."

"One moment—the marriage—who was the lady?"

"The lady was—and *is*—Miss Rodney."

"I see. Pray, go on. Do you believe, then, that Bruce Deering *poisoned* his uncle because he feared an exposure?"

"Is it not as clear as daylight? Think how *much* was at stake!—think of the risk he ran—of public exposure—of loss of fortune—and—of the woman he *loved*, for he *was* madly in love with Valentine Rodney, as well as with her fortune. And then—the chance of exposure would not be great. Mr. Deering was an invalid, a sudden death was one of the probabilities of his case. He feared his uncle's watchfulness, his keen intelligence."

"A strong case, surely. And now *why* did *Brook* Deering sacrifice himself and invite suspicion by concealing himself as he did?"

"Can you *ask?* That is because you do not *know* Brook Deering! First, then—there was a strong bond of affection—the two had been comrades for their lifetime. Next, there was *family pride*, a desire to save them *all* from an open disgrace. If his father had been in his usual health, Brook would have gone to him at once for counsel ; and there, again, was another strong reason for his course of action. To expose Bruce, might be to give his father his death-blow. And, *last*, setting all else aside, *he* was the *sole witness* to the crime. How could he stand up before a court of justice and literally hand over his life-long friend and playmate to the executioner? He *could not* do this thing, and when he came to me, pleading for my help that he might be concealed and thought to be still abroad—*how* could I

refuse him? *No!* I *retract* such cowardly words! I never *thought* of refusing him! Not for the sake of *Bruce Deering!* I *long* to see *him* punished as he deserves! It was for *his* own sake that I concealed Brook Deering in St. Mark's, where he slept upon two carriage robes, all I could venture to carry into the place; and where, every day, I went and made the great organ wake the echoes, to relieve his monotony, and for a pretext, carrying food and wine concealed, as best I could. I got him safely to Beechwood, where, for the sake of a recreant cousin, *he*, who was the son of the house, lived like a rat in the garret. And I invented pretexts to enter that house in order to communicate—for him—with his old nurse, who is his stanch friend, as you doubtless know."

"Doubtless. And now—one thing more. Was I wrong in saying that you conspired, with Madam Sarita, to keep the Deerings away from Beechwood?"

"No. You were *right!* Brook was almost ill, and we knew that he could not be so well cared for when the family came, in fact, it was our purpose to get him away from Beechwood before their return; but someone sent them an anonymous letter, which brought them too soon, when Brook was unfit to be removed; and, from that time, Sarita watched constantly for the chance, which only came with the wrecking of the evening express at the east embankment, near Beechwood. In the first excitement, she rushed to the mansard, having first scattered the maids and men—got him down the rear stairs—blew out the lights in the lower hall—and got him out of the house, almost in the face of that clever Doctor Ware, who has attached himself to Beechwood."

"You are right in calling Ware clever," said Murtagh; "and now another question. Am I right in saying that your hasty journey to New York was to communicate with Rose Matchin, and to arrange for her quiet stay in that city?"

"I see you have informed yourself of everything. You are *right*—of course."

"And—you were generous enough to open your purse to supply the money which was to keep this rather costly favourite reconciled to New York, with only the society of her foreign companion or chaperon?"

She threw back her head with an angry gesture.

"You are *wrong there;* it was *himself* furnished the money, of which he had more than enough! And now, if you have finished, may I ask what use you intend to make of all this? How much courtesy am I to expect at your hands?"

"Every courtesy *possible*, Miss Wardell! I intend, if possible, to close this matter—for the sake of the innocent, who must suffer for the guilty, if not with them—as privately and secretly as possible. Just how we shall bring this about I cannot now tell; but, believe me, what you have told me here shall not be made known, except to those who *must* be enlightened; and, whatever steps are taken, I will, with your permission, consult with you or inform you in advance. Until you hear from me, therefore, rest in the assurance that nothing is changed. Above all, have no fear of being called upon as a witness

in *any* degree. If possible, the case of 'The People *versus* Deering,' shall be taken out of court, and the guilty parties *privately* dealt with. And this, as you have said, for the sake of the family pride and honour, and to save the innocent from utter humiliation."

He arose and stood before her.

"Miss Wardell, allow me to express my thanks and my respectful admiration for the course you have pursued, your courage and candour. Be assured you will not regret it."

"Regret it!" she also arose. "I shall not regret it, or *any* act of mine in connection with this case, if it helps to put Brook Deering in his true position in the eyes of his friends! And be assured that *nothing* could have forced this information from me if you had not shown me *plainly* that my affianced husband—unable to speak for or defend himself—was in danger of being put in the place of the true criminal who would sacrifice his best friend to save himself! It was *this*, and the knowledge of *how* Lysander Deering met his death, which has caused me to turn Brook's generous self-sacrifice to naught by denouncing Bruce Deering. Merciful heavens! *how can* that man be punished enough? And it is the hideous knowledge that he has sacrificed himself for his father's slayer that has turned my poor boy's brain!"

She dropped back into the cushioned chair, and buried her face in its velvet softness.

"Go; pray go!" she breathed. "I cannot bear more!"

Murtagh caught up his hat and cloak. "Do not stir," he said, gently. "I can find my way out and back to my place. Good morning; and again thank you. You shall hear from me soon." At the door he turned back. "About that horse, Miss Wardell; with your consent I will return it to the stable as you suggested;" and then he was gone.

CHAPTER LIV.

SCIENTIFICALLY PROVED.

To quit Ora Wardell's house noiselessly, and to return the horse and wagon, leaving it, as Ora had suggested, at the corner nearest the livery barn, was easy enough for Ferriss Murtagh. He rang the bell at the barn door, crossed the street swiftly, and was soon making his way northward, choosing to take the route over which he had been driven by Ora.

Beechwood was now virtually in the hands of the detective and his helpers; and he knew that he should find the door, opening upon the private stairway, on one hand, and the library on the other, open, or, at least, unlocked, with Tom Wells on guard, close at hand.

And he was right. The door was ajar, and while he was closing it gently, Tom Wells, with a tiny pocket lantern, came softly down the stairs.

Everything was quiet, Wells assured him, and Murtagh seated himself upon one of the lower stairs, and began to remove his shoes.

"Anything happened, Tom?" he whispered; "sit down here and tell me, while I breathe once or twice."

"Wal, sir—for once, the young feller got the drop on Doc; and he done it slick, too."

"How—what?"

"We can't 'magin' jest how he contrived—I'd a *swore* he took down the dose Doc gave him, an' jest as willin' as a lamb, too—I give him the glass myself. Doc says, he must a held it in his mouth, and then got rid of it without swallerin'; *anyhow* he got enough to put him to sleep for most two hours, but then he woke up, and—jimmenetty! if he didn't more'n hop round! so William says. *He* was in the bedroom; Doc was in the *anty*-room playin' asleep, and I was outside."

"Well?" whispered Murtagh impatiently. "What did he *do?*"

"*Do!* why, he went to the winder, and sort of listened; looked at the clock on the mantel, took a look at William—*he* was playin' snooze, *too*, ye know, and *then* he grabs a long cape out of a closet, and slides past Doc on tiptoe; an'—*what* do you think he done?"

"How should I know?—go on!"

"Well, I allus knew these crazy fellers was *smart;* he turns around, when he gits outside, an' *locks the door.*"

"What!—locked Ware in?"

"Eggsackly! You see the hall wa'n't quite so light as usual, an' me sittin' in the big winder to the front end; so when he gits around the corner, *I* whips out an' lets Doc out, all right; an' we finds Mr. Brook a tryin' Sarita's door, an' makin' all the noise he darst. Wal—mebbe you think it was *easy* for us to git him back to his room agin! An'—say, what d'ye s'pose he played on us?"

"How do *I* know? Wells, hurry up, I want to see Ware! *I've* got a story to tell that will beat yours."

"Well, sir, if he didn't make quite a rumpus tryin' to git to this door; and then he turns round an' *wakes up.*"

"*W—h—a—t!*"

"Yes, sir. Lets on that he's been *walkin' in his sleep.*"

"*Gad!*" Murtagh gets up quickly, and Wells, grinning from ear to ear in the darkness, follows his example. "Quick, Wells, where is Ware now?"

"Anty-room. Young feller makin' believe sleep, or *is* sleepin', one or t'other."

"Then go and take Ware's place; I must see him at once."

The doctor joined him promptly; and no sooner had he shut the door than the detective caught him by the arm.

"Ware—Wells has told me,—*is* that fellow asleep, or shamming?"

The doctor smiled grimly. "He's asleep this time beyond doubt; even the small quantity of the opiate that he had taken would, I knew, cause considerable thirst, and, when he began to pace the floor, after we got him back, I contrived to drop a white powder into the bottom of his drinking-glass, which stood as usual upon the tray near the head of the bed; the pitcher was about half full of iced water, and before long he motioned to William to pour him out a glass; the powder was tasteless, and dissolved at once—he drank it, and is fast asleep and likely to remain so for hours."

"And—the other—the sleep-walking?"

"Shammed, of course. He was anything but asleep."

"But how strange—that *he* should *sham*."

"While the other indulges in the *real* thing? Yes, and that reminds me. Have you the keys of that inner room of the mansard at hand?"

"Of course—why?"

"Sarita—"

"What! Did your dose fail *there* too?"

"It has not failed as *yet*. Of course one can not be *sure* in these cases; consider the unnatural, overwrought condition of the patient. Upon nerves in a normal state one might count with absolute certainty in using that drug. But one can never calculate, you know, upon a machine once it is out of balance; and both these human machines are out of balance just now. So I shall not be surprised if the drug fails to hold her for the usual length of time; but it will soon be morning. Now about those keys,—something happened here, about an hour before you left the house, which I very much wanted to communicate to you if there had been a chance; I was in Brook's room, and Sarita had gone to hers, as I knew, supposably to follow my advice and retire. I found that she had failed to take the draught I had put, for *her*, into liquid form, as I had directed. You know I had advised her to go to her room early, and to *lie down even if she was not sleepy*, knowing, of course, that slumber would soon overtake her. So at about eight o'clock, being told by Miss Rodney that she was in her room, I went to her door and rapped boldly. A little to my surprise, she opened the door at once, and I saw the vial untouched upon the table. I took it up and was about to remonstrate, when what do you suppose she said, by way of excuse?"

"Great Cæsar! How can *I* guess? Something foxy and French no doubt!"

"She said she had been 'hesitating,' fearing that the liquid might be '*too stimulant*,' and was thinking to ask me, 'if I would not give her something *very* strong *to make the sleep come*.'"

"The *artful dodger!* She suspected the opiate!"

"Of course I saw the trap in this—and told her I did not *want* to give her an opiate, but, if she would take the liquid and try to sleep, I would give an opiate if she failed. I said that I would leave her door unlocked, and if she was awake at ten o'clock she might set the door ajar; I would *then* give her the opiate, and turn the key upon her, and as I left her I added, 'I will look in at you once or twice, meantime, just to see if you are *obeying orders* and *lying down*.' You comprehend?"

"Yes. You counted on her going to sleep, before she had lain there half an hour. Did she?"

Ware smiled.

"This is what she *did*. I had put Wells in my room, where with no light, and the door ajar, he could watch her door and see her if she came out and went toward either of the lower stairways. Half an hour after she had swallowed the medicine, I tapped at her door, waited a moment, with my ear close to the panel, and then looked in.

She was half way on, or *off* the bed, and I knew that she had but that moment thrown herself upon it. She had put on the loose grey gown, and on her feet were soft knit slippers. She declared that she was getting quite drowsy, and I left her. Ten minutes later, Miss Rodney made some pretext to enter her room, suddenly, without warning. She found Sarita pacing the floor swiftly; the lamp was burning its brightest, and the windows were opened wide. Miss Rodney says that she seemed both angry and embarrassed at her abrupt entrance, but declared herself upon the point of retiring, and as sleepy, 'so *sleepy* as not to hold her head straight.' Miss Rodney, of course, excused herself and withdrew, going toward her own room, but turned back a moment later to tell me the result of her visit, as it seemed quite safe for her to do. As she was about to step out from the little hall, she paused a moment and peeped around the corner, thinking, she said, that I might be visible somewhere near Brook's door, my own, or, possibly, Sarita's. She did not see me, but she saw Sarita coming cautiously out of her room with a candle in her hand. Miss Rodney drew back and waited a little, thinking it better to interrupt her if she came that way; and then it seemed to her that she would better go boldly forward, as if about to go to Brook's door, it being yet early; accordingly she moved forward, but instead of seeing Sarita face to face, or hurrying toward the little stairways, she saw at first nothing; and then, at second glance, just a fold of grey woollen and one slippered foot going up the attic stairs."

"Ah! up *there!*"

"Miss Rodney went softly to the foot of the stairway and peeped up. She saw Sarita with a bunch of keys in her hand, and she watched her until, after some effort, she fitted a key and opened the door leading into the first attic—the old attic; and then when Sarita closed the door and disappeared, she came to me. Of course I knew that Sarita was not asleep *then*, and I also knew that whatever sent her up there she would not remain long; she would fear a visit from me, and would make haste. I felt that we must know, if possible, why she was there, and *said* so, and Miss Rodney at once took in the situation. She glanced down at my feet, '*You* can't go up in those shoes, light as they are, Dr. Ware,' said she, and then she put out her own little slippered foot. 'Can you trust *me?*' she asked; 'I am sure I can go silently—and safely.' We were already at the foot of the stairs. I nodded, and, without another word, she bent down, pulled off her little slippers, and went up the stairs like a lapwing. She must have remained fully ten minutes, kneeling upon the landing with her eye at the keyhole, and then she made a quick spring and came downstairs almost flying; the first turn being in this direction, she turned this way, and, a moment after, we were both crouching upon the little stairway, half-way down. We listened, and then I went back to reconnoitre. Sarita was in her room once more. I went to the door and fumbled at the knob for a moment, then I opened the door, slowly, that she might have ample time. Of course she lay upon the bed, her eyes fast shut, and I closed her door and turned the key."

"Umph! regular game of cross purposes!" muttered the detective.

"I went back to Miss Rodney and she told me that Sarita had spent everyone of the ten or more minutes of her watch, in trying, with a big bunch of keys, to open the inner door, that she had worked fast, and seemed in desperate earnest, clenching her hands, rolling her eyes, and moving her lips as if almost beside herself when, one after another, all the keys failed her. Now, Murtagh, there is something of *value* to her, and *possibly* to us, hidden in that attic; and the sooner the door is opened to her the better."

"What! do you want her to go there *alone*, and—*awake?*"

"Assuredly not! Without a doubt the woman is sleeping now. From what Miss Rodney tells me, sleep overtook her in a state of great mental disquietude; I did not intend to let the draught hold her until morning, and before this time the secondary effect of the drug will have taken hold, the mental faculties will waken while the physical are still asleep, then she will *walk*, and—if it is open—she will enter the new attic."

"Have you unlocked her door?"

"An hour ago."

"Then I'll get the keys and—"

There was a faint scratching sound at the door, and Ware opened it to admit Wells.

"Hist!" Wells whispered, close to his ear, and without closing the door. "She's movin' agin! She's gone over to the other hall."

Murtagh and Ware exchanged glances of intelligence.

"Go to Deering, Wells," directed the detective, in a sharp whisper, and, a moment later, he was creeping up the attic stairs, with matches and a dark lantern in his pocket, and a single key in his hand.

Lysander Deering's room was now in the care of Murtagh and Ware; and, every night, after the servants and family had retired, the key was turned in the lock, and Sarita permitted to go through with her strange pantomime whenever the spirit of sleep so moved her. To-night, as usual, it was repeated, but briefly, and as if from force of habit.

"It's more like self-hypnotism than somnambulism," thought the doctor as he watched her. "A purely muscular function, the mental faculty is not yet in the ascendant; she's a mere machine at this moment."

It looked as if he were right. She came out from the chamber and went with stiff slow movement back to her own room, and a full half-hour passed before she again came forth. Ware, sitting in the cushioned window-seat at the end of the hall opposite her door, watched her with interest, never stirring until she had passed out of sight and up the attic stairs, armed, as on her waking visit, with candle and keys.

He followed her slowly. He knew that Murtagh was awaiting her up there, and that, from some dusky nook or corner, he would make mental record of her every movement.

But he had not placed his uplifted foot upon the first stair when the door of the "anty-room" was opened with a quick jerk, and he turned back hastily with a hand uplifted, and with half-a-dozen quick strides was at the half-open door, where William stood anxious-faced and

eager. Brook Deering lay raving upon the floor of his dressing-room. "He's been roused from his sleep," William declared, "by that ghostly step, sir, and he's worse than ever, sir. He's *awful* this time!"

It was quite true. The usually quiet "lunatic" was now a raving one; his eyes seemed starting from their sockets, and pulse and heart were beating a danger tattoo. But beyond the fever and nerve collapse, for this it was, there was but one indication of mania, and this was his old cry. He had heard his father's footsteps, and he could hear them still!

For half an hour the doctor had no thought for anything outside that room. At the end of that time Brook, weak and exhausted, lay still upon his bed, his nerves controlled by a strong bromide, and William, weary but watchful, sitting beside him. And then Wells, with eyes wide open and wondering, beckoned the doctor out into the hall.

There was no sign there of either Sarita or the detective, and Ware, after going to the door of the woman's room, and satisfying himself that she was still in the mansard, came back to the low window and sat down. The window, a shallow bow, projected over the side piazza underneath, and was surrounded by a broad balcony with a low railing. The sash was open to the top, and Wells had stepped across the cushions and now sat with his feet resting upon the balcony. It was very still, and the cool air, which foretold the coming dawn, was grateful to each.

"Doc," whispered Wells, "I've been spiling to ask one or two questions. That sleep-walkin' was a sham, I *know*, and I'd some doubts about the *crazy!* But—was there any make-believe about *this* spell? Was *that* shammin'?"

"No. It was only too real!—as complete a collapse of the nervous system as I want to see. A few such would make him—not the mild 'luny' you have seen him, but a raging maniac."

"Jimmenetty! and you think he *really believes* that he hears them footsteps?"

"He not only *believes* it, but he *does* hear them—hush!"

Silently, stealthily, Sarita was coming down the three steps visible at the foot of the attic stairway, and they watched with breathless interest while she pushed wide open the already unlatched door of her room and entered. A moment later, the detective appeared at the foot of the stairway; coming to the turn leading to his own door, he beckoned to Ware.

"Go back to Deering, Wells," the doctor whispered, "and don't call me unless he becomes violent again, which is not likely to happen. The woman I shall lock in once more."

"An' high time, too," muttered the huntsman as he stepped back into the hall; "it's the crack o' day, an' there goes a rooster a crowin' this minute."

The rooster had crowed many times, and the sun was above the horizon before the detective and his colleague separated. The story of Murtagh's encounter with Ora Wardell was yet to be told, and it was important that Ware should hear it in all its details. But Murtagh's first words were not of this.

When Ware had followed him into his own room, and they stood face to face behind the locked door, Murtagh, his eyes gleaming, and his voice fairly thrilling with suppressed excitement, brought both muscular hands down upon the doctor's shoulders and said :

"Ware, we've made *the home run!* As I live, I believe we've found the missing link ! Yes, sir ! the *key* to the whole situation !"

"Thank Heaven for that ! for I fear that we must force the crisis in any case. In forty-eight hours from now *these two* might be beyond our possible control."

"Then we won't *wait!* we'll strike *at once!* Sit down, man, I've a great deal to tell you."

Ware seated himself promptly. "I am quite ready to listen," he said, "but, first, let me tell you that I have settled *one* vexed question. The ghostly footsteps are real enough. I don't fully understand it, but the *fact* is clear enough—Brook Deering fully believes that he is—haunted by his father's footsteps, and—if he is *ever* thoroughly insane it will be because of this very large bump of superstition which he has inherited, no doubt, from some foreign ancestry."

"Ah ! Then you still think—".

"I do not *think* now. It is scientifically *proved.*"

CHAPTER LV.

ORA'S LAST MOVE.

ORA WARDELL possessed a strong personality ; loyal to the death to whom she loved, and implacable in her hate. But strong as was her will, it was not stronger than her pride.

At the moment of her parting with the detective, the strongest feeling of her heart was hatred towards Bruce Deering, the man who was, in her eyes, the first cause of her humiliation of the hours just past ; and who had put in jeopardy the safety, perhaps the honour, of the man she loved ; her affianced. But she wasted no moments in useless repining, or railings at destiny. Instead, she rang for her maid at an early morning hour, and, after careful instructions, sent her out upon a very delicate mission.

She was to go to Beechwood and ask to see Miss Rodney in person. Should she fail in this, there was a note, carefully sealed, to be sent up to that young lady. She was also entrusted with a second note upon the chance of her encountering in the grounds, or about the halls, either Sarita or Bruce Deering. This second note was addressed to Bruce, and the maid was charged to return it to the sender rather than deliver it into any other hand.

The note to Valentine read as follows :—

"MISS RODNEY,—In certain crises a magnanimous woman will lay aside all prejudice and personal feeling, and will aid *even an enemy*, if by so doing, great danger, or suffering, *or shame* may be averted from friends that are dear. Such a crisis has *come* for *you and for me. Together* we may lessen, or even avert a terrible blow to the inmates of Beechwood. If you love Brenda Deering *or any other* of that household, *come to me at once*, without a *moment's* delay. If I were free to come to *you* in this emergency, I should not hesitate *one instant ;*

but this would defeat my purpose. Under no circumstances let *any one* know your destination, but in the name of our mutual womanhood! for your *own* sake! for mine! *in Heaven's name*, COME.

ORA WARDELL."

This was the summons which was put into Val Rodney's hand as she came downstairs to a solitary breakfast, after an almost sleepless night; and she answered it with as much promptness as Ora could have desired.

"Tell your mistress," she said in an undertone, to the waiting messenger, "that I will be with her in half an hour. How did you come?" kindly.

"In Miss Wardell's phaeton, miss. It is waiting at the lower gate." The maid was shrewd and quick of eye, but she left Beechwood without a glimpse of either Sarita or Bruce Deering, and the second note was returned to her mistress.

Breakfast was a brief function for Valentine that morning; her toilet even briefer; and in just thirty-five minutes after the reading of Ora's imperative summons, she appeared at Wardell Place, and was promptly conducted to the *den*.

Ora rose to receive her with a sigh of relief, and Valentine knew, after a glance at her pale face, compressed lips, and sombre eyes, that conventionalities would be as naught between them, and that the Ora Wardell now before her was the natural woman.

"Thank Heaven!" ejaculated Ora as she came to meet her. "And thank *you* for being so prompt."

"I could do no less," replied Valentine gravely; and then she stood awaiting the next word.

Ora turned the key in her door and drew forward a seat for her visitor, which, after a moment's hesitation, Valentine accepted.

For a moment Ora stood looking down upon the bonnie face, full, now, of serious inquiry; and then, with a spasm of pain crossing her own fair features, she dropped into a chair opposite Valentine and covered her face with her hands to conceal a sudden quivering of the lips. It was but a momentary weakness, and, when she lifted her face, it was set and stern.

"I have sent for you, Miss Rodney," she began, "to ask your aid, not for myself, but for another in whom we both have an interest. And I will say at once that it has to do with that wretched murder, the 'Matchin murder,' as it is called by all Pomfret, and with the poisoning of Mr. Deering—"

Valentine started.

"Which," went on the other, "was unknown to me up to last night, or, this morning, to be exact. It concerns Brenda Deering, whom you love; Brook Deering, who is, *at least*, your friend, and *Bruce* Deering, who is not *worthy* of that name!"

Again Valentine started; and this time an ominous light flashed from her eyes, but she held back the words that sprang to her lips, and Ora went on.

"To begin, I will say that, last night, very late, I received a visit from a detective, who, he tells me, has been an inmate of Beechwood for some time; and who is certainly a keen and energetic man. He came to me because he thought, or believed, that I possessed know-

ledge concerning the Matchin case, which would be very useful to him—"

"*You!*"

"Yes, I. And so it proved. Shall I tell you of what he accused me?"

Valentine's face was horror-stricken,—but she closed her lips firmly and for a moment seemed to consider. Then she replied: "As you will."

A faint smile flitted across Ora Wardell's face, and she leaned a little nearer her guest. "He accused me of having concealed the slayer of Joe Matchin, on the night of the murder, *and after*."

"*My* GOD!" Valentine involuntarily drew back, and her lips, stiff with horror, framed the words, "Is it—*true?*"

"*No!* The man who slew Joe Matchin has *never been in concealment. He* has been *free* and surrounded by friends! It was the loyal friend—who, to save the guilty, and divert suspicion, willingly sacrificed himself—that *I* sheltered, fed, and aided as best I could, while for weeks he lay in concealment. It was the *only witness* to the crime; who, if his presence in Pomfret had been known, would have been dragged forward and forced to testify against the murderer! He came to me and begged me to aid him, in the only possible way, to save the man who, assassin though he was, had still been his friend, his almost brother, for a lifetime!"

"*Stop!*" Valentine's face was set, and her eyes were blazing. "Not another word until you have told me the names of these two men!"

"Miss Rodney, *do not*, I beg of you, misunderstand me!—My motive justifies—"

"*The names!*"

"As you will. The names are those of the nephew and the son of your late guardian."

"And—*which*—?" her voice died in a whisper.

"Miss Rodney, it was *Bruce Deering* who killed, first, Joe Matchin, and then—later—his uncle. And it was *Brook* Deering who, reaching home that night, and, meaning to lodge with his cousin, went out to meet him at a late hour and from this house; and who, witnessing the murder, came back to implore me to save him from the horrible task of denouncing his cousin—his playmate and companion—whom he had loved as a brother; and it was to ask *you* to aid *me*, to help me to warn them *both*, so that they may not be taken unawares, that I have sent for you. I—"

"Stop." Valentine had risen slowly, and now Ora arose also, and the two confronted each other, both pale and quite forgetful of self. "One moment," said Valentine firmly. "*What* do you ask *me* to do?"

"I cannot go to Beechwood! I could not approach either of the two if I went. What I ask is simple, only that you carry back two notes, both of them unsealed."

"To Brook and—Bruce?"

"Of course!"

"Miss Wardell, it will be useless. Wait—I will be as frank as your-

self. If you have seen the detective you must know that he is not a man to make mistakes. If he dealt with you so plainly, and left you to use his information as you would, be assured that it was because he has no fear of *anything* you might do, or attempt. Nor is this all. *I* have been for some time, in a measure, in the confidence of this detective; and have lent him my aid in his work. I am sorry for you, Miss Wardell; a woman does not do what you have done for a mere friend, and I *must* tell you that you are *all wrong;* no matter what the detective, for his own purpose, may have told you, or *allowed you to believe*, Bruce Deering *is not the guilty man!* You have been shamefully tricked and deceived!"

"*Never!*" Ora's dark eyes were blazing, but she controlled herself by a strong effort. "Miss Rodney, having said so much, I have, I *claim*, the right to ask you to hear me out! I can *prove my words;* you—who are so sure of your ground, dare you sit down now and hear me out? Hear the story, word for word, if you will, as I told it not long ago to your detective?"

Val's head went up, haughtily erect, and she turned, with a look of cold scorn that sat strangely upon her pale face, and seated herself again.

"Let us waste no time," she said; "I am listening, and I shall not interrupt."

For an instant Ora's face wore a look of wonder and perplexity; then she, too, sat down, and again told her story, as she had told it before to Ferriss Murtagh.

Valentine, as she had promised, heard her without interruption, but with frequent starts and changes of countenance; her face settling, at the last, into pitiful gravity.

At the end both were silent for a moment, and then Valentine spoke.

"Miss Wardell, I thank you for telling me this; all of it! It puts what *you* have done in its true light, in my eyes; and in your place—with your faith and belief, I hope—I *think* I might have been as brave—as stanch, as loyal, as *you!* You have taken great risks for—the man you loved and believed in, and now—you have been so frank, may I ask one question?—and will you answer it frankly?"

"Ask it."

"Why did you and Brook—keep your engagement from—his father?—from all of us?"

"Is it possible?—do you—not *know?*"

"I have *asked.*"

"And I must answer. Did you never know then—that it was the dearest wish of your guardian's heart that Brook and *you* should become affianced? That he had made known these wishes to Brook? *That* was why! In his ill health Brook dreaded, yes, feared to cross him. He hoped—we both hoped, that time would work changes—"

"Miss Wardell! There has been deceit, treachery, somewhere! I *know* that my guardian had quite other plans for me. *I* certainly had no such thought for myself. And I must say to you again—you are *all wrong!* Bruce Deering *is not* the guilty man!"

Ora sprang up. "And—do you mean, do you think—or accuse Brook of these horrors?"

"I accuse no one," she was speaking calmly now, holding herself in check; and she arose slowly and turned toward the door. Then she paused. "All this is terrible! I wish—" she turned back suddenly. "Give me the two notes," she said; "I will deliver them if it is possible."

Ora hesitated. "You doubt the possibility?" she questioned.

"No. Only—I have not entered Brook's room since his illness, but —you can trust me, Miss Wardell."

"I *must* trust you!" Ora took two unsealed notes from her girdle, and then drew back. "Valentine Rodney, I wish I could understand you!" she ejaculated.

All the fire and haughtiness were gone from Valentine's face, her voice was gentle, even pitiful as she replied:

"Trust me, *now*,—and, after a time we shall both understand better; and then—I hope I may be your *friend*, Miss Wardell! This—" taking the letters from Ora's hand, "I am doing *solely* for *your* sake."

. . . . . .

Valentine Rodney, when she entered her pony carriage, and took up the reins, was far from being the composed young woman she looked. What Doctor Ware had said was quite true; she was overdrawing her stock of strength, and her nerves were tense, to the point of danger almost, even before she had received that summons from Ora Wardell.

She had hurried away from Beechwood without seeing Brenda, and had left word that she meant to drive to Mrs. Baird's, where she came and went freely, like a daughter of the house. She was very glad of this chance to rest and compose herself before returning home, and she knew that Mrs. Baird, at that hour, would be at her usual morning task of planning the dinner menu, and laying out the day's work in general, in the little room off the kitchen, sacred to the china shelves, the linen drawers, and the housekeeper's desk. As for Mr. Baird, he was pretty sure to be in the garden at this hour, or at the stables.

"If I can *only* have a quiet quarter of an hour in the cool library!" she murmured as she left her ponies at the side entrance, where they were content to stand in the cool shade of the *porte-cochère* and the great trees beyond.

She was trembling from head to foot, and she realised that she was on the eve of a breakdown—now that she was alone, and the restraint she had put upon herself was relaxed. She met a housemaid at the entrance, and, bidding her say nothing to Mrs. Baird, until she had finished in the kitchen, and being told that the library was unoccupied, she entered through one of the long French windows which stood invitingly ajar, and gave a sigh of relief as she noted the dusky coolness and seclusion of the place.

The long library was, in fact, only lighted from the single window at which she had entered, all the others being darkened, and she crossed to a low couch, where she flung herself down with another sigh, louder and longer than the first.

For a moment, she sat with her hands clasped in her lap, her pulses throbbing, and her nerves quivering yet from the excitement of her late interview; and then, suddenly, she flung herself prone upon the

couch, and great sobs shook her frame, while from her lips came the low moan :

"*Bruce Deering!* Oh, Heavens! I cannot bear it! *Bruce!*"

What Doctor Ware had predicted had come to pass. Valentine had broken down utterly. And then—from out the shadows at the lower end of the room, arose a tall form, the form of Bruce Deering; and, as if in answer to a call, he advanced swiftly, with a strained, eager look on his face.

She did not hear him. The sobs were coming thick and fast, and the little hand that hung at her side was tightly clenched.

"Valentine! Miss Rodney!"

She sprang erect in an instant, the sobs choked back, and she almost shrieked when she saw him beside her, and then the words came tumbling over each other with hysterical eagerness, and she snatched from her pocket the two letters.

"Ah! it's you! So *glad!* I mean—so—I've just left Miss Wardell, your *cousin's fiancée.* She—she sent you *this*—no, THIS—" snatching back one white envelope to substitute another. "I—I promised her to give you this! It's—all quite safe—with me—I—*I* shall say nothing; *take it,*" thrusting the letter into his hesitating hand. "And—you ought to *read* it—*at once*—at *once*—QUICK!" and she motioned him toward the window, and again buried her hot face in the pillows.

Mechanically he obeyed her, and, opening the note, read these words :—

"It is not to save the life of a *coward* and *assassin* that I send *you* this warning, Bruce Deering; but because—*now* when he lies helpless through loyalty to *you*, I cannot see his self-sacrifice come to naught. The detectives *are close upon you*, even *this* may be too late, —but, if you *can*, fly before Brook Deering learns that *his father's blood* is *also* upon your head! *I* have learned what *as yet he* does not know. May the punishment which you may, perhaps, escape here, overtake you elsewhere, *double assassin that you are!* O. W."

With this strange warning in his hand, Bruce Deering strode back to her, and the tone in which he now addressed her quieted the half-frantic girl as if by magic.

"Miss Rodney—do you know what this note contains?"

"N—no," she gasped.

"It is not sealed!"

"*Sir!*"

"Therefore—you *sanction* its sentiments—of course?"

"I?" Her voice trembled; her head drooped.

Suddenly, he flung back the nearest curtain, and threw open the blind.

"Read that note," he said, thrusting it into her unsteady hands; and, somehow, it never occurred to her *not* to obey him; she leaned toward the light, read the lines, and flung the paper from her.

"And *I* brought you *that!* Oh, Bruce—*Bruce!*" she stretched out her hands imploringly, and the tears stood in her eyes, but he drew back.

"Valentine—do you believe that charge? any word of it?"

"*I!*" She sprang up and stood before him, her eyes shining; she had forgotten her own dignity, everything—in the face of this awful

charge against *him.* She had held her own in the presence of that other woman, but *now*—"Do *I believe it?*" she cried. "Bruce Deering, would I sit at the same table, sleep under the same roof with you, if I *did?* Would I have watched and studied, and forced that detective to make himself known to me, that I might tell him that you were *innocent*—and that he must begin again?—would—"

"*Valentine!* Did *you* do *that? Why* did you do it?—*why?*" His face was aglow with intense feeling. He had caught her hand in his. Ignorant of what was going on about him, he had sought the banker's house that morning, weary and discouraged at what seemed, to him, a forlorn outlook; and, sitting with bowed head in the dark library, thinking of Val Rodney and his hopeless love for her, *this* had come to pass! He had told himself that, even if she cared for him, it would be cowardly and unmanly to seek comfort from *her*, and, from the day of Joe Matchin's death, he had held to a stern resolve; but, in spite of his resolve, and her pride, the barriers were down.

As her small hands fluttered in his grasp, he bent and looked into her eyes, which she could not altogether hide.

"Val, *my love!*—my little darling! Tell me! *Tell me!* I must know *now!* Was it only pity? Did you *care?* Tell me! *Tell me!*" He caught the two little fluttering hands in one larger, stronger one, and with the other turned the tear-stained, mignonne face up to meet his own.

"*Look* at me, Val! Tell me which was it. Which? *Did you care?*"

The tear-wet eyes met his for a moment, and then, with something between a laugh and a wail, for Val was fast growing hysterical, she sobbed out:

"You *know!*" and was caught fast in his arms.

. . . . . .

A little later, when Val, quieter now, and happier, but with tear-wet cheeks and still sighing softly, turned her eyes towards the dropped note, she started suddenly.

"Bruce, you must destroy that at once!"

"I will—but, Valentine, am I not to know what that mad message *means?*"

She shook her head. "Bruce, you *won't* ask me now? *Please* do not. I'll tell you *this* much. I went to Miss Wardell's in answer to a note from her, urging me to come. And—Bruce, I believe that *she* believes just what she charges in that hateful note. I don't understand it. But—I—I have been taken *a little bit* into the confidence of the detective she speaks of,—and until I see him, until I understand, *won't* you trust me? I *can't* say more—only—*he* is your friend, Bruce, *and you know I am!*"

CHAPTER LVI.

TRAPPED.

If the night had been eventful to some of the inmates of Beechwood, the morning following it was quiet enough; and until high noon, the

house itself seemed sleeping. Except in the servants' quarters, the great place appeared deserted. The detective and Doctor Ware were taking some much-needed rest. Brook Deering did not leave his bed at his usual breakfast hour, and refused to be disturbed. Sarita was sleeping the sleep of exhaustion, with Mrs. Merton to look in upon her from time to time; and only Tom Wells, who had kept himself as fresh as possible for just such an emergency, was on the alert in Deering's rooms, and up and down the west hall.

When Brenda appeared in the breakfast-room, Valentine was well on her way to Pomfret, and she breakfasted with Bruce *a deux*. They were a very silent and preoccupied couple, in spite of their spasmodic attempts at sociability, and, soon after, Bruce mounted his horse and rode to Pomfret; while Brenda, after tapping at the door of the "anty-room" to inquire after Brook, as usual, went to her own room, and did not appear again until luncheon-time. That Valentine had gone out for an early drive did not surprise her. Valentine was addicted to early hours, and, of late, both had been too self-absorbed to be good companions.

At Brook's door she had been met by Wells, who held the door slightly ajar and informed her, in an undertone, that "Mr. Deerin' was restin' now; but he'd had a baddish night, and the doctor had gi'n orders that *no one* was ter see him or *come in* until further notice." This same information was given to Bruce a few moments later, as well as to Mrs. Merton, who came to inquire on behalf of Sarita, who, she said, was quite ill.

At the turn of the hall, as Mrs. Deering was going from Brook's door to her own, she met William bearing a well-laden tray. He paused at sight of her, moved back a few paces, and, setting down his burden upon a small table, in order to free his hands, took from his waistcoat pocket a small folded note, and held it out to her.

"It's from Mr. Holly, ma'am. He was up quite early, and asked for a cup of coffee. He'd only jest come out to ask how was Mr. Brook, and he said I must give you his excuses for not 'pearin' at table. He was that broke off his rest last night, he says. He don't give up yet, ma'am, but there's rats in the walls."

"Mr. Holly's" note ran as follows:—

"Mrs. D.,—I think S—— may apply to you for the keys, and permission to enter the north attic; please find some pretext, if needful, for not giving her the entry there *until afternoon*. And—if you and Miss R—— would make that little visit to Mrs. Baird shortly after luncheon, and *remain* until you hear from us—you might thus avoid—unpleasantness. Understand, this is not necessary to *our* plans. Only a suggestion for *your* comfort. M."

After reading this note, Brenda pondered it with a look of doubt, and then, shaking her head with quick determination, she swept the doubt away, and rapidly penned a reply, carrying it herself, unobserved by any, to the detective's door. Stooping down, she pushed it, thinly folded as it was, beneath the door, and with a quick fillip of her fingers sent it out of sight on the other side, where it lay in full view, and was the first object upon which Murtagh's eyes fell when he arose, "a giant refreshed," from his nap.

He opened it at once, and read it, after the first words, with a smile upon his face.

"My friend," so it ran, "since our talk I have reconsidered. If it *is* only to avoid a little *(or even much)* personal discomfort, and if my presence in the house will in no way affect or *hinder* your plans, I prefer *not* to leave my house. To me there seems something cowardly in such an act. I will confine myself to my own rooms *entirely*, if that is your wish. And you will have as full liberty as if I were absent. Indeed, I can truly plead 'indisposition' as a reason for my seclusion, which, *I am sure*, will be *shared* by Miss Rodney. Mrs. Merton will quite understand that *all*, in the meantime, is in your hands. B. D."

The position taken by Mrs. Deering when she had first discussed terms and conditions with Murtagh, she had strictly adhered to, and, while blindly assenting to his requests or following his instructions, she had at no time asked for, or received, information from him.

The determination, taken while under the smart of Brook Deering's half-frantic insinuation, had been strengthened by other causes, and—while she had ceased to see herself in the light of a possibly accused or suspected person, suspected as being one of the inmates of Beechwood, with free access to the room of the victim of poison, and with a vaguely possible motive—she now saw always before her another horrible possibility, which, while leaving *her* free, might still bring a hateful stigma upon the house and the name of Deering.

This hideous possibility, which had entered her brain and pierced her heart on the day of Jonas Wiggins' first visit, and which was never absent from her mind, had grown as the days went by; she had done what she could, what she must have done; she had spoken those words, which might have been words of warning—to both—Bruce and Brook Deering, and, come what might, both had been made aware that an amethyst button, such as had been once owned *by both of them, and by herself*, had been found upon the scene of Joe Matchin's murder, and that it was believed to be in the hands of the enemy, to be used—as an aid to fasten the crime upon—the guilty one.

How shocked she had been, and how terrified, when the detective had approached her upon this subject! how she had tried to avoid or evade his questions! And to what little purpose! Well—at least, she had not wavered in her refusal to supply him with a duplicate jewel; and she had put it out of his reach! She did not know how futile all this had been made by just a few words between her long-tried and faithful Judith and Val Rodney's new maid,—and she had declined to listen to any details concerning it; reminding him that she was to know *the results*—when the time came—*not* the *processes*.

And then—her husband's strange fate!—*Why* had they asked her to open and read that paper left to her in trust, and not to be opened, yet? And what had *that* to do with her husband's death? And so on and on ran her thoughts.

At ten o'clock the morning train from the east went rumbling over the east embankment, in full sight of her windows; and, half an hour later, she heard the sound of an arrival, and footsteps and voices in the direction of Miss Rodney's room. She rang for Judith, who informed her that Miss Valentine's "new maid" had come back.

An hour later, she learned, through the same source, that Master Bruce and Miss Valentine had arrived *together*; and, shortly before the luncheon hour, while Judith was dressing her hair, Sarita applied for an audience and was, of course, admitted.

She was pale, haggard almost; and she owned that she had not

been well, "because of a bad head and '*nerves*,'" but she declared herself quite strong now, and anxious to be occupied. "Could madam give her some sewing?"

Madam could not, at that moment; and then came the request.

Might she trouble madam then for the keys of the *new* attic? In some way one of her trunks had got in there, and in it was fine linen, and patterns, and some unfinished needle-work. If it would not be too great trouble, might she go and search for those things in her trunk up there?

"Madam," of course, had no objection, but she must ask Sarita to wait—she would send Judith with the keys soon after her toilet; of course there was no *haste?* "None whatever," Sarita declared, but she left the room, nevertheless, with a look of keen disappointment—much *too* keen to attribute to so inadequate a cause—upon her thin, nervous face.

. . . . . .

It was long past the luncheon-hour when Judith came to Sarita's door with the keys of the new mansard, or attic, murmuring some light excuse for the delay; and, ten minutes later, Sarita came cautiously out from her room, locking her door, and, after a sharp glance up and down the hall, flitting up the attic stairs, noiseless, and swift.

From her window she had seen Valentine and Bruce Deering sitting under the great trees in Val's favourite place. She knew that Brenda had retired to her room at once, after luncheon; and she had overheard Mr. Holly and Doctor Ware arranging for a drive into Pomfret, as they stood in the hall near her door.

She had made an effort to see Brook after leaving Brenda's room that morning, but Cerebus, in the form of Tom Wells, was still on guard; and he had not failed to note her quick look of disappointment and chagrin as she turned away.

As she mounted the stairs, and opened the door at the landing, her strained and anxious features relaxed a little, and when she had passed through the second doorway, and turned and locked it behind her, she breathed a great sigh of relief and paused to look about her.

Everything was as she had last seen it. The low window over the front porch let in enough light to render visible the piles of boxes, packing cases, and discarded furniture pushed back against the wall, and under the eaves, in the orderly fashion which the detective had observed, leaving the central and inner portion of the long attic quite clear, so that the line of light coming in through half-shuttered front windows, traversed a straight course to the rear, where it lost itself in a promiscuous pile of old chairs, discarded mattresses, boxes, trunks, and folded bedding.

It was toward this darkest portion of the attic that Sarita took her way, after a moment of listening and looking about her. The piles of odds and ends here would have seemed, even to a sharp-eyed observer in this dim light, to be a dense mass piled high and packed close. From the wall to the north at this point was outlined a sort of alcove, indicating an extension a little more than half the width of the mansard, and forming, as one would at once guess, a part of the long dining-room below, with between a large guest chamber.

From the opening of this alcove to the wall in the rear, a space of some 16 feet, there seemed to be no vacant space; but when Sarita had taken from her pocket a candle, a stubby small bottle with a large mouth, and half-a-dozen matches, all of which she placed upon a broken chair, she put out her two hands, and taking hold of a thick mattress, which stood up sidewise against the seeming mass behind, and, pulling it toward her, glided in behind it, and so through a narrow lane, neatly left open, between the heaps on either side.

Near the wall, and directly beneath the window, which in the rear was high and narrow, was a small open space; and when Sarita had mounted upon a box to peep through the shutters, and feel along the window-frames, she got down and went back for her candle, bottle, and matches.

The candle she lighted carefully, and stuck it into the mouth of the stubby bottle, and with this to guide her, she went back to the open space beneath the window.

"Peste!" she muttered to herself as she put the candle down. "I was wrong not to leave just a *little* more light! No one has seen."

She took a half-worn quilt from one of the heaps, and, mounting the box once more, hung it over the window by sharp little nails placed there by her own careful hands, and, getting down, put the candle upon the box where it was farthest removed from the inflammables.

And now her movements were full of feverish energy. She approached a pile of cushions, carpets, quilts, and rugs, heaped in a corner nearest the window, and began pulling them away, flinging them down hurriedly anyhow; and, from beneath and among them, at last she drew forth a small trunk, old and evidently of foreign make.

When she had drawn this close to the box holding the candle, she put a hand to her throat, and loosening her bodice at the neck, drew forth a black cord, at the end of which hung a couple of keys. Selecting one of these, she unlocked the trunk, with some difficulty apparently, because of a rusty lock, and put back the lid.

For a moment she peered into the open trunk, and then she removed a shallow tray without so much as a glance at its contents, and began to take out folded garments, parcels securely tied, boxes, and queer shaped objects wrapped in paper and tied with faded ribbons. These last she fingered as if they were living, and she loved them, and put them down slowly one by one.

They were children's toys, tattered and broken for the most part, and after them came a bundle of infant's clothes, which she pressed to her lips with tear-dimmed eyes.

And now she has lifted in her hand a box of dark wood, small, and shaped like a portable writing-case, and as she holds it she starts nervously, glances around, and seems to listen. She even starts as if tempted to make sure that the door is fast locked—knowing all the while that it is quite secure, and, finally, she places the box in her lap, and, with the second of her two keys, opens it. And now a

watcher could have seen that the long thin fingers clutched at the edge of the box nervously, and that her hand trembled, and her thin lips twitched.

From the box she takes out some old and faded pictures, a number of yellow and crumpled newspaper clippings, a small bundle of old letters, and—last—a *cushion-like* something, which might have belonged upon some ancient toilet-table, a pin-cushion doubtless—but one having lost its plumpness—flabby and faded.

And now she takes from her pocket a tiny knife, and with a slim blade cuts remorselessly into the dingy silk, lays the cushion open in two sections, and from its centre takes out an envelope of the long legal sort. It is folded double, to fit its place between the layers of cotton, and when she smoothes it out upon her knee, a name, written in a strong, bold hand, is displayed upon one side, with some words below; and on the reverse side is a heavy seal. The seal is broken, and the packet, which is quite thick, has been opened.

The woman looks at it for a moment as it were almost an object of hatred, and then, with sudden energy, she drops the envelope in her lap and begins to replace the things, first in the box, and then in the trunk.

And now all are replaced, and she must rise to reach and put back the tray.

She turns half around in the narrow space in which she sits, puts the long envelope upon the projecting edge of a box, almost at her side, and bends over to reach the tray.

And *then*—there is a slight clicking noise close beside her,—a ray of light flashes across her shoulder. Gasping, she turns, her hand stretched out toward the precious paper, and sees—standing close behind her, one hand holding a dark lantern, open now, and with its light turned upon the envelope held in the other hand—"*Uncle Holly.*"

Even as she turns, his keen eyes have read the name upon the big envelope, and now he fixes them full upon *her*—without the spectacles—keen, and stern.

"Don't scream, madam! You'll get along best with *me* if you take matters *quietly*."

The woman's face is grey with terror. She could not utter a sound if she would. Her eyes dilate; her teeth chatter; she reels, stumbles, and clutches with both hands at her throat.

Only for a moment, however. Then the staring orbs suddenly contract and narrow; the mouth closes, with a literal gnashing of teeth, and settles into thin cruel lines. The face, still pallid, is the face of a fury; lithe, noiseless, quick as a cat, she springs upon him; one hand with claw-like fingers outstretched toward him; the other thrust into the bosom of her gown, from whence she has withdrawn the two keys.

But she has not counted upon the strength and agility of "Uncle Holly," while the swiftness of the sudden transfer of the envelope to a side-pocket, and the careless dropping of the little safety lantern, are totally unexpected. Like a flash the two hands—one outstretched to clutch, and the other grasping a slim gleaming stiletto, half in, half out of her bosom—are caught and held, lightly, but so firmly that, after the first momentary and instinctive writhing effect to release her-

self, she ceases to struggle, and stands before him, her eyes blazing and defiant, and her white teeth almost meeting through her thin underlip. There is no sign of surrender in her gaze; hatred and defiance look out of her eyes as she stands glaring at him with closed lips.

She does not dream of the truth, and her thoughts are working swiftly. She has been followed, she thinks, by this prying old man, out of curiosity, or, perhaps, distrust; and he believes himself to have captured her in the act of theft. But she is soon to be undeceived; though Murtagh is not unwilling to test the mettle of this strange firebrand of a woman.

For a moment they stood silent, both, and motionless; then, with a quick movement, too quick to comprehend, much less resist, he has drawn her two wrists together, and, holding them with one hand, with the other forces open the fingers grasping the stiletto, which he catches as it falls, and drops into the pocket alongside the big envelope.

"*Now*, Madam Sarita," he says, still holding her hands, "in order to save you further waste of strength, let me tell you that the door of this attic is locked, and the key in my possession, and that you will only injure yourself by resisting me further! I am not here simply to discover you in the act of secreting, or, perhaps, *destroying* the document stolen from Mrs. Deering some weeks ago; I have *wanted* just such an opportunity as this gives me to *talk* with you, alone. I am not your *enemy;* I have no wish to do you injury; and, when we have finished our interview, it will be *your own fault* if you do not go back to your room, as you came, unmolested." He released her hands, and, stooping, picked up the still burning dark lantern. "Sit down upon that trunk," shutting the lid of the trunk which stood beside them, "and hear what I have to say to you."

She looked down at the closed trunk, and up at the man who was coolly seating himself upon a pile of carpet, opposite, and very near, as well as between herself and the narrow avenue through the piled-up *débris*, and sat down in sullen silence.

"Now," began Murtagh, "not to waste time, I will begin by telling you who *I* am, and why *you* are cornered here in this manner. Did you ever suspect that I might not be the genuine uncle of Mrs. Deering?"

The woman started violently, and a look of terror came into her face.

"In fact, I am *not*, madam; I am a detective, and I came here to discover the person, or persons, who first murdered old Joe Matchin, and afterwards, Mr. Deering of Beechwood. It looked, at first, like a very difficult task, but I am happy to say that it is *very nearly completed.*"

He paused here to see if she would speak, but she only sat clutching the sides of the trunk with both hands, and trembling, in spite of her visible effort at self-control, in every limb. Murtagh watched her keenly through narrowed lids.

"I am on the point of denouncing the guilty parties," he resumed, with increasing sternness; "and it will depend upon *you*, Madam Sarita, whether the assassin is given over bodily to the sheriff, and,

later, to the hangman, or whether he is given a chance to *escape* some of the consequences of his crimes."

The woman had ceased to tremble, and her eyes had grown foxy and keen. At last she opened her lips.

"You are speaking to me in riddles," she said, with well-simulated calmness; "and I think you must be insane! I do not believe you to be a detective, and even so, *I* have nothing to say about these things. I am not afraid of you, and you had better let me pass and leave this place before Doctor Ware misses me, and comes to search for me. I came here by Mrs. Deering's order, and she will not thank you for taking from me a paper which she has seen fit to conceal for long weeks, to *keep* it from such as *you*, perhaps—"

Murtagh arose with an impatient gesture.

"We won't waste time for the sake of indulging in useless dramatics, madam, although you do them well! I promise to put this important and well-concealed document into the hands of its lawful owner very soon. As for Doctor Ware, since you rely upon him, you shall have the opportunity to appeal to him. He is on the other side of this heap of rubbish, and if it had occurred to you to look behind the furniture piled so loosely against that north wall when you entered this attic, you might have seen us both waiting there quite comfortably for your coming; for we knew you were coming. Doctor, you may as well come in, and look after your patient."

In spite of herself, the woman uttered a quick cry when Doctor Ware came slowly toward them through the narrow opening, and, with grave, unreadable face, took his place just behind the detective, standing there without a word, and with only a glance in her direction.

"Now," resumed the detective, "to show you how *much* we are in earnest, and how little it will avail you to deny, or refuse what we shall ask of you, let me tell you that, from the moment when Brook Deering landed in New York, left his 'young friend' in charge of the Frenchwoman whom he had picked up on the other side, and set out for Pomfret, we have traced his every movement, from the time when he dropped from the train at the curve and crossed the meadows,—and, by the way, he did a very unwise thing when he stopped to ask for a glass of milk at Widow Hunt's farm; for even his disguise failed to conceal his dainty feet and hands, his height, and, above all, the *limp* which he got in jumping from the moving train. Besides, he forgot to change his *voice*, which, you know, would be remembered without fail. Then there was his visit to Miss Wardell, his encounter with Bruce Deering, who was on his way home from a social evening at the hill, directly after the killing of Joe Matchin, his escape, and Miss Wardell's prompt aid.—His hiding in the church, of which I have *proofs*, as well as of Miss Wardell's visits to *you*, with notes and messages from Brook. He was concealed *here*, in this attic, where he slept by that front window in the cosy nook under the eaves, and was fed and ministered unto by *you*—until, on the night of the railway mishap, you contrived to smuggle him out, under Doctor Ware's very nose, too, so that he might return a few moments later, and pose as a victim of the accident on his way home. We know it *all*, madam, and we know the *motives* behind it all! *Why* it seemed

necessary that Joe Matchin and Lysander Deering must be put out of the world in order to screen a scamp, a spendthrift, forger, and libertine, who saw no other way to save himself from exposure, and to succeed in his scheme of marrying an heiress! *Which* heiress he would marry, would depend on the success of all his complicated schemes."

"Ah! *mon enfant! mon Dieu!*" She flung out her hands, and ground her teeth in impotent rage and fear; but the foxy look still lurked in her burning eyes, and, filled as she was with terror unutterable, she yet fought her way inch by inch. "*Dieu! Mon Dieu!* What is all this? You accuse *another*, and all the while you threaten *me!* as if it were *my* guilt! I know nothing of this! *nothing!* I have never believed Bruce Deering was a murderer, but even so, say *he is*, say you can *prove* him so, what is this to *me?* Why should *I* help or screen Bruce Deering, who never cared for or helped *me?* Why, I say, do you threaten *me*, and—accuse?"

"Because we *know you*, woman! If we have traced Brook Deering, we have also traced *you;* and in your case it has been *backward.* Look back to the time when you agreed, for a royal sum of money, to come to America as nurse to the child of a sick lady, and to keep inviolate a *certain secret concerning that mother and child.*"

"Ah!" It was just a hiss, or catching of the breath, accompanied by a start that must have brought every tense nerve into play.

"That secret you *have* kept," went on the detective remorselessly, "and, that it might still be kept, the poison cup was put to the lips of the man who for long years has been a princely benefactor to you *and—yours! We know your secret*, Madam Sarita; and now shall the law take its course? shall the unworthy man you have struggled, cheated, and sinned for, be given up to the law? or, will you take the steps that may save him from the *worst?* Him—and—yourself? Wait—" for her lips were parted, and the foxy look was still in her eyes. "You cannot *parley* with us! Denial is useless. You will comply with our wishes, or you will go from this room *to prison.* I will not allow you to trifle, or absorb our time with either falsehood or argument! All is in our hands! Ask Doctor Ware how much chance you have, if you refuse the only terms we can offer you."

For a moment she sits with her eyes fixed, her teeth set, and her fingers clenched until they cut into the flesh. But she is fairly trapped, and she knows it well. She is a woman whose love is as strong as her hate, as deep as her wickedness; and more than her life rests now in the hands of this terrible, inexorable man. She lifts her eyes, no longer crafty, but full of desperate appeal, to Doctor Ware's face.

Until now he has not spoken. But in response to her look, he moves to the side of the detective, and says, gravely and slowly:

"Every word that my friend has said is *true.* Young Deering's fate rests in your hands."

But she is not yet fully conquered. She makes one last, frantic throw.

"But, the *proof!* You cannot do it! How can you?" and her eyes glitter with the triumph of a sudden and welcome thought.

"You cannot drag a poor, sick, insane young man into court! He *could* not be a witness—"

The doctor checks her with a swift and imperative gesture.

"Cease! Let us end this! I may as well tell you that *I* shall be *one* of the many witnesses against you, if you persist in this folly of denial and resistance. You have betrayed yourself, in your sleep, night after night. We have left your door ajar, and you have gone more than once *to Mr. Deering's rooms*, and *there* enacted a pantomime which convinces me that it was *you* who crept to his bedside in the night—and dropped the deadly poison into his medicine! It was through your somnambulism that we, following you to this attic, have found proof of Brook Deering's stay here. And as for him, I have known *from the first* that his insanity was *all* a *sham*. Give up that thought. His sanity can be proved *too easily*—besides—" he checked himself and glanced inquiringly towards Murtagh.

"Besides," interposed Murtagh, "Miss Wardell has confessed *everything*."

"THE SNAKE! The *she* SATAN!"

Both men smiled.

"She was wiser than you—that's all," said Murtagh. "Come, madam, your decision—*quick*."

For the first time she turned upon him a look of appeal. "Give me time," she said; "let me think—for ten minutes, no more."

"Certainly."

"Of course."

She lowered her head upon her hand, and Murtagh, turning toward the doctor, took the captured envelope from his pocket, and held it before his eyes.

"The stolen packet?" murmured the doctor.

"The *last link*," whispered the detective.

They waited patiently until Sarita lifted her head.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked hoarsely.

"Make a confession to be written down and witnessed; a confession that will clear Bruce Deering of all complicity in both crimes."

"I will *never* do that!" she cried excitedly.

"What, not to save *Brook?*" questioned Murtagh.

"To *save!*—but how can that be?"

"If I show you how it can be done, will you agree?"

"Shall he escape—go free?"

"He shall be permitted to leave Beechwood, and his name shall never be connected with the crime."

"And—and *I?*"

"Are you willing to undergo imprisonment to save—Brook?"

"Yes—*yes!* So that *he* goes free; but the *name*, how can it be? I will write the confession! I will go to prison; only show me how it can be done, and *his* name be saved from disgrace!"

"I promise you that the names of Bruce and Brook Deering shall stand clear in the sight of all men."

"But how?—*how*, HOW?" she clutched her trembling hands; she was quivering again with suspense and excitement.

"This must end," Doctor Ware whispered to Murtagh, "or she will break down before we have done with her."

"How?" she again demanded. "*Who* then shall be called the guilty one?"

Murtagh looked her full in the eager eyes.

"*Your son*," he said.

There is a sudden gasp, she throws up her hands, and the doctor springs forward and catches her as she falls forward. She has fainted.

CHAPTER LVII.

A DETECTIVE IN COURT.

MADAM SARITA came down from the attic with drooping head and lagging step, and shut herself up in her chamber, where, soon after, she was visited by Doctor Ware and Mrs. Merton.

Sarita was lying upon her bed feverish and heavy-eyed, and the doctor explained to the housekeeper his ideas and his wishes concerning the patient.

"She is threatened with an illness, I very much fear," he said, and with truth. "She has not been well for some days, has a severe cold, and much fever just now. Her pulse is too rapid, and she must keep her room, if not her bed. There must be *no chance* for exposure, and—if you can spare one of the maids to sit with her and attend to her medicine—it will be best; she ought not to be much alone just now."

When Mrs. Merton came out upon the rear piazza where the two housemaids and Rosa were enjoying their afternoon hour of leisure, and told them of Sarita's illness, and the doctor's wishes, all were silent. The two maids were busy with some light needle-work, and Rosa was darning, with infinitesimal stitches, a tiny hole in one of her mistress's silken hose. She listened, glanced from one to the other, while the two maids bent over their sewing and looked foolish, and seeing their hesitancy, looked up.

"Perhaps—" she began hesitatingly, "that is if you don't care to spare one of the girls, Mrs. Merton, I might be of some use. I have plenty of time, and am quite accustomed to nursing—if Miss Rodney does not object."

Mrs. Merton accepted the proffered service at once. She might spare Martha or Kate, of course, but they were not used to nursing, and clearly did not care to make the experiment. Of course, Miss Rodney readily placed her valuable versatile new maid at Mrs. Merton's, or Doctor Ware's, service; and so quietly, but none the less securely, Sarita was made a prisoner in her room.

It was quite true that she was ill—from terror, rage, long and constant anxiety, and overstrained nerves; and this made it easy to keep the fact that she was also a prisoner, above stairs, except for Mrs. Merton, who was fidelity itself, and who, now that the crisis was so near, was taken into the confidence of her mistress; who told her

that Uncle Holly was, in fact, a detective whose word must be law to *her* as to *all* for the present, and until the crisis was past.

And then the amazed woman was turned over to "that detective!" who enlightened her further; and who found, as he had predicted, that her good sense and strong nerves would be invaluable to them, once her first surprise and horror—upon hearing how her well-beloved employer and friend had met his death—was over, and she had found time to face so much that was strange and terrible.

He had not gone into details beyond the facts of Mr. Deering's murder, and the suspicion against Sarita. And he did not so much as name Brook Deering.

He told her that Sarita must not be permitted to leave her room, and that no one must be allowed to approach her, unless they came accompanied by the doctor or himself. And he left it to Doctor Ware to add that any attempt to see, or communicate with, Brook, must be prevented. "It would be bad for him to see Sarita now," the doctor had added with much truth.

And now Beechwood contained, closely guarded in her west wing, two prisoners; for Brook Deering, whether he knew it or not, was doubly guarded, first by William, who, believing his young master insane, was carrying out the doctor's orders to the letter. And, second, by Tom Wells, who took his instructions from Murtagh at first-hand.

And now, Brenda and Valentine, full of dread and hateful anticipations of they knew not what, scarcely left their own apartments, save to meet at table, with the doctor and detective and, sometimes, Bruce, who was now much with John Redding, working with suddenly revived energy upon what Redding considered a strong defence.

They had sent for Mr. Ingram, and on the morning of Sarita's downfall, Bruce had announced his arrival on the previous day late in the afternoon.

When Sarita had been established in her character of invalid, Doctor Ware sent away a messenger with a note addressed to Mr. Ingram, in care of Mr. Baird. And when the dinner-hour arrived, Mr. Ingram appeared in the character of guest.

Later, the keen old lawyer was closeted with Murtagh and the doctor in the library, and the talk was long and serious. When at last it was over, Mr. Ingram opened Lysander Deering's great oaken desk, and, selecting from its stores some legal-looking paper, with pens, and a portable inkstand, placed them upon the table near him, and said to Doctor Ware:

"Prepare your patient, doctor. We can't get this matter over too quickly! It's a delicate job, but I think I know how to carry it through,—thanks to *you*, sir," bowing to the detective. "When you are ready, send one of the servants. You are right in thinking the matter should be allowed to 'leak out.'"

And so it came about that, after a time, Martha came into the housekeeper's room, where Mrs. Merton and two of the women were sitting about a circular table sewing and chatting, and delivered her bombshell.

"You couldn't guess what's happened; no, not in weeks! That old gentleman—you said he was a lawyer, you know, Mrs. Merton. Well,

he's gone, with pen and ink, and a lot of big sheets of paper, up to Sarita's room; and Doctor Ware's gone with him, and Mr. Holly. And I believe she's going to make her will! I took in an extra lamp for them, and Sarita looks awful now, I tell you! Who'd a thought she was sick enough for that!" and Martha sat down amid a chorus of inquiries.

Nearly an hour had passed, and the group about the table had not yet exhausted their list of questions and wondering comments, when Rosa entered the room. She looked pale and very grave.

"Mrs. Merton, will you come to Sarita's room at once? You are wanted, I believe, for a witness."

There was a chorus of questions as the housekeeper arose to follow the messenger; and Martha caught at Rosa's skirts to detain her. "Rosa, tell us—only tell us—is it a will?"

"No!" replied Rosa, twitching her dress free. "It is *not* a will!" and she hastened out at the heels of the housekeeper.

. . . . . .

A night and a day have passed since Mr. Ingram wrote, at Madam Sarita's bedside, the document which was not a will; and the Pomfret Court has assembled, and the moment for the opening of the "great Pomfret murder case" has come. The court-room is crowded, and lawyers and witnesses are in their places. So also are Brenda Deering and Valentine Rodney, with Ora Wardell sitting near them.

Early that morning, Ora has received a note from Murtagh, sent, with due thought for appearances, by the hand of one of Mr. Baird's servants. The note, received with a palpitating heart, was read with a sigh of relief.

"Miss Wardell," so it began, "you will do well to attend the trial to-day; and you can *safely do so*. Your name will *not be used*, and you will not be called upon to testify in *any manner*. The case will be a *short* one. Would advise your going *early*, and that you take a place near Mrs. Deering, as if one of that party. In all sincerity your friend and *midnight* GUEST."

Realising the wisdom of the suggestion, Ora has entered with her maid, and placed herself near the Deering party, thus avoiding any public exhibition of unfriendliness; and, as she seats herself, they exchange salutations.

She has received back the note intended for Brook Deering, and entrusted to Valentine, with a few words of explanation from the latter.

It was put into her hands by one of the Beechwood servants, on the evening of the day on which it was sent. Val's note sa,d only this:

"*I am not allowed to visit or speak with B. D., and cannot keep the enclosed longer.*"

Brenda is veiled, but Valentine's fair face, beneath its dainty toque, is bared to the public gaze, and is proud and composed. Ora, too, looks about her with unmoved countenance, but, somehow, her face seems fixed and mask-like, while her hands and feet are restless.

And now the accused takes his place near his lawyer; and, a little to the surprise of some, Uncle Holly is also close at John Redding's elbow, while Mr. Baird occupies a place not far from Mr. Ingram,

with Doctors Ware and Liscom on either side, and Doctor Arden very near. Mr. Morse is beside his partner, quiet of manner as usual; an occasional smile flits across his refined blonde face, as he now and then exchanges a few words with his *confrère*, and neither himself nor his chief display the usual bustle of conference, rustling of papers, and reference-hunting in big legal tomes. Indeed, the display of red-taped documents is ridiculously small upon the table before the three lawyers who are to represent Bruce Deering. In fact, save for the two or three folded papers lying before Morse, evidently in his charge, and, apparently, his *only* charge, one or two solid volumes, and the small note-book in Redding's hand, there is little display of legal ammunition.

Two other things have been noted, and greatly wondered at, by the anxious onlookers. One is the presence, at the side of John Redding, of Mr. Ingram, who represents to the eyes of Pomfret all that is, or could be, of legal knowledge, acuteness, skill, and integrity, combined in one little man. For years this small, grey-haired, keen-eyed, old man has been *the* lawyer of his district; and his fame has been sounded far beyond it. To be Ingram's client was, almost, a guarantee of success and safety! To have him for an opponent meant disaster indeed.

It had been known, from the first, that Redding and Morse, Deering's partners, were to conduct his defence; and now, to see Ingram —the "little giant"—who long since has taken in his shingle, and has refused more than one fat retainer, because he has "retired himself," —sitting beside John Redding—with that upward tilt of the aggressive chair, and the glint in the half-shut eyes, which they knew so well, and which, usually, boded disaster for someone—it was enough to cause much wonder, and busy whispering; and a considerable falling off among those who had taken Sheriff Carton at his word, and believed that he had it "all in his own hands, sirs," according to his boast.

For Sheriff Carton had grown strong in the faith that he had woven a network of proof about Bruce Deering which he would find it hard to break. And, in truth, the attorney for the prosecution, who was really a very good lawyer, and a gentleman as well, was of the same opinion; and with excellent reason.

There was the circumstantial evidence, as strong now as it had seemed on that first night—the night of the murder—Bruce Deering's presence at the dead man's side before he had drawn his last breath; the blood stains upon his garments. The fact that Matchin had denounced him, in his cups, as an enemy, together with the belief that Rose Matchin's disappearance furnished a sufficient cause for this enmity. There had been found two or three witnesses who could certify to this "enmity," and then, there was the fact of the open doors. They had not been forced from without, but, evidently, opened from within in the usual manner. What stranger could have prevailed upon stanch old Joe Matchin to open the doors of the bank, and give him entrance at such an hour? Besides, Matchin, when "discovered," was fully dressed, as if expecting a visitor. And last, there was Jonas Wiggins.

At the moment of his visit to Wiggins, Murtagh had aimed only to protect Brenda and Bruce Deering; and in this he had succeeded, by playing upon the man's fears; but Jonas had grown wise, thanks to Jane's tutelage, and, when he found himself unmolested, he began to believe, what he wished to believe, namely, that the detective had left Pomfret.

Warned by his earlier experience, Jonas had ceased to boast, or throw out hints, as of old; but he had sought the sheriff at a time when that official much needed a clue, and, with much secrecy and circumstance, had related to him the story of the amethyst button.

To be sure, the button was not forthcoming; and, after some discussion, it had been decided that they could not molest Wells, since Jonas could not prove his suspicion that Tom had secured the prize. But Carton felt sure that—this button, bearing the initials of the accused, would "clinch" his case; and he looked upon Wiggins as a valuable witness.

Contrary to the general expectation, the jury was chosen with promptness and ease, neither party challenging the other, or in any way hindering the smooth working of the preliminary routine, and, while the work of selection was progressing, it was noted, with some wonder, that the prosecuting attorney, leaving the work to his colleague, was listening with grave attention to Mr. Ingram, who was whispering close at his ear.

It was also observed, that, at the close of Mr. Ingram's communication, if such it was, the prosecuting attorney seemed to ask one or two questions; and then he nodded, and thrust some papers—which had lain before him, and to which he had referred from time to time,—into a capacious inner pocket, after which he folded his arms and leaned back in his chair with his eyes half-closed, like the merest looker-on; and this attitude he preserved, after speaking a few words in the ear of his associate,—words which caused that individual,—younger and more impulsive than his leader—to start suddenly, flush redly, bite his lip, and, finally, to subside into a poor imitation of his leader's quiet. But his face was not like the others, to be converted into a mask at will; and from time to time he might have been seen to glance across to where Mr. Ingram sat, and wrinkle his brow, as if studying a conundrum of which that astute lawyer held the key.

When the prosecuting attorney arose to open his case, the crowded court-room settled into stillness. Jason Cole was known to be able, eloquent, and above all, *safe;* no fear of *his* overlooking a point, or giving an advantage to his adversary; and it was confidently expected that he would begin with one of those concise, cutting arrangements, which more than once had brought popular favour to his own side, before the first witness had been called, or the case fairly presented; and which had gone far to shape the opinion of a previously unprejudiced juryman.

To-day, however, he contented himself with putting his case in a few words, quietly, almost indifferently; and he finished by saying, with a slight bend of the head toward the judge, and the jury-box:

"Your honour, and gentlemen of the jury, when a case becomes a foregone conclusion, it is best not to prolong, needlessly, the legal

formalities, which *must* be gone through with, in order to satisfy a public, which, after all, *has* some claims upon us, and to convince, and do justice to all. I have reason to believe that this case will be a short one; and that the defence, upon their part, will be as concise as I mean to be. In order to aid us in our effort to release you soon, and to help you to a swift decision, at the proper time, I beg you, gentlemen of the jury, to follow *closely* the evidence which I shall now put before you. I will now call Mr. John Redding, attorney for the defence, to the witness-stand."

Redding left his place and promptly seated himself in the witness-box, and after him came Morse, Tom Wells, and half-a-dozen others, who had been present, among the first, at the scene of Joe Matchin's death; and the facts, as gathered from their accumulated evidence, proved, namely:—

The presence of Bruce Deering at the bank, as described by Redding and Morse, and known to all Pomfret, and upon the scene of the murder, while Matchin yet breathed. His statement as to the man who had grappled with him, and fled. The presence, upon his hands, face, and linen, of several fresh blood-stains,—his agitation,—the ringing of the bell, etc.

In fact, the prosecuting attorney had only drawn out precisely the same scant testimony that had been given at the coroner's inquest, when he dismissed his witness, and arose to address the court.

"Your honour, and gentlemen of the jury, I have no wish to make of my proceedings any needless mystery, nor to arouse, among this earnest, and, I believe, sympathetic audience, any unnecessary criticism or wonder; I simply ask you to trust me as you have in the past; I have placed before you the *facts* as to the occurrences of the night when Joe Matchin met his death, as they are known to my witnesses; and, of course, this is but the beginning of the case. There are other facts. There is other corroborative testimony of a circumstantial nature, as well, of course, as other witnesses—which I might deduce or bring forward, here and now, in rapid succession. But, because of certain knowledge in my possession—and so recently obtained that I could only shape my course as I am now doing—because of this newly acquired *and reliable* information, I shall now, with the permission of the court, allow Mr. John Redding or Mr. Ingram,—who appears, at a late hour, as one of the attorneys for the defence,—to take my place, and question the next witness."

There was a murmur of surprise at this unlooked-for change of front; and the judge wrinkled his brow, while Sheriff Carton hastily left his place to hold what seemed like a dialogue of fierce remonstrance with Mr. Cole.

But neither Ingram nor Cole were lawyers to be gainsaid; to deal in needless sensationalism; or to make mistakes. Neither were they men who were given to making smooth the ways of their opponents; and, as Mr. Ingram was, evidently, quite as ready to take up the *rôle* of inquisitor as was Lawyer Cole to lay it down, the unusual transfer was made, and Lawyer Ingram stood up to face the judge and jury, with the look they, for the most part, knew very well.

Ingram was, or could be, a humorist; and, at the right time, when

there was less than a life at stake, he could be merry, witty, or caustic; could indulge in the lightest of persiflage, or be bitingly severe. To-day, however, as he bowed with his accustomed old-fashioned courtesy to bench and jury-box, his thin, keen old face was serious, almost to sadness; determined, beyond a doubt, and just a trifle impatient.

He took a thin packet, held together by a rubber band, from one of his pockets, and, placing it upon the table before him, cast his eyes over the audience, the jury, and, lastly, the face of Bruce Deering, pale and sternly set, before he began to speak.

"Your honour, and gentlemen of the jury, it is true, as my predecessor has said, that I came late into this case, and I will tell you my reason. When I was *first* approached in regard to this case I declined to touch it, *not* because I am an old man, and have retired from active labours; I would need to be feeble, indeed, to refuse to serve, *in any way*, the cause of Lysander Deering, or his friends and family. I declined because—after hearing the story of Joe Matchin's death, and all that one of the ablest of detectives could tell me,—*I feared—feared* to see myself defeated, and the name of Deering, that old, good, and honoured name, cast into the dust, and coupled with a dastardly crime! Yes, gentlemen, I tell you, frankly, that I feared the network of testimony—circumstantial, it is true, but *strong*, for all that!—I found that this evidence against Bruce Deering could not be broken or refuted." He paused, took up the packet, and, holding it in his hand, turned his eyes once more from judge and jury to the prisoner at the bar.

"Your honour, and gentlemen," he went on, with deep-toned earnestness, "I have *recalled* that decision, that refusal, and am here, *now*, to *refute that evidence*, ALL OF IT. And I now call Detective Ferriss Murtagh to the witness-stand."

In the midst of the buzz of consternation, hisses—a few—and coming from the quarter where Jonas Wiggins and his boon companions were crowded together, and the cries of the clerk for "Or-r-rder—'n—ther co-o-ort," "Uncle Holly," in full character, came forward, and took his place.

For a moment it seemed that an outbreak from Sheriff Carton was inevitable,—but, through the bustle all about him at the moment, Lawyer Cole contrived to project a sibilant whispered "*Don't do a thing that you'll never be able to outlive, Carton!*" and the sheriff subsided, gnawing his lips, and clinching his hands.

When order was restored, and the oath administered, Mr. Ingram began; and his first question, betraying, as it did, the fact that the supposed uncle from California was, in reality, a detective from New York, was in itself so stunning that the "gentlemen of the jury" felt quite prepared for anything that came after; for, owing to the fact that there was no opposition in the selection of the jury, it was composed mainly of citizens of Pomfret, who, if they had not glimpses of "Uncle Holly" during his short sojourn in Pomfret, at least were aware of his presence at Beechwood.

The disguised detective was ready with his answers—ready and brief. After giving his name, occupation, and the date of his first coming to Pomfret, Mr. Ingram asked:

"Mr. Murtagh, beginning with the date of your arrival in Pomfret, will you tell us, in your own way, why you came, and how you carried on your work here? I, of course, shall interrupt you, at need, and I trust that Mr. Cole and the jury will do the same, without regard to personality; what we are after is *the truth*."

"I came to Pomfret," began Murtagh, "on the day after Matchin's death, and by the noon express. I came by request of Mr. Baird, and by order of my chief. I was disguised as a working man of middle age—"

One of the jurymen leaned forward quickly. "Describe your disguise," he demanded.

Murtagh did so, and then a second juryman interposed, "Are you disguised at present?"

"I am." He smiled and removed his spectacles; a titter ran round the room. Order was called again, and Mr. Ingram asked:

"Will you tell us how you began on the case? How you followed it out?"

Murtagh told of his arrival at the bank, dwelling upon the inquest at some length, and making it so graphic that many forgot that this was but repetition.

"I examined the premises, outside and in," he went on, "very closely; and I asked Mr. Baird to take me into the bank. This *before* the inquest. Mr. Baird, after looking about, declared that nothing had been disturbed; but I soon showed him that *both* safes had been tried."

There was a movement of surprise at this, but Murtagh went on:

"Of course, having heard all that had happened the night before, I was quite prepared to believe that Mr. Bruce Deering was the guilty man; I had loitered outside, in the crowd, before presenting myself, and had picked up considerable; I saw how there might be such a possibility; and so I asked Mr. Baird if he would send Mr. Deering into the room of the bank, I mean, where the deed was done. I said that I wanted young Deering to show me just how the body lay, etc., but, of course, *that* was only talk; I wanted to see him at close quarters. We detectives have a good many ways of testing suspected persons, unknown to them, and I wanted to try one or two little tests upon Mr. Deering. It would do no good to try and explain them; one must *see* a thing of that sort, and have pretty sharp eyes, too. Well, gentlemen, when we came out of that room I had made up my mind about Mr. Deering. *I believed he was an innocent man!*"

Again a call to order was necessary, and again Murtagh went on:

"Such a decision clears the way for one. And *now* I began to look for *the other man*, the man whom Mr. Deering met at the door of the bank; and who grappled with him, and left the blood marks on his linen. For, now, I *believed* in that man. Some of you have seen me about your streets, riding or driving Mr. Baird's horses; for I played the part of horse jockey and groom combined for a time, and all that time I was busy. I had made up my mind that the murderer did not get away from Pomfret that night. That he *could* not have done so, and, of course, I began to look for his hiding-place. Now, when we

have no premises, nothing to begin on, we construct—a theory ; and this was mine.

"'Suppose,' I said to myself, 'that someone, who knows all about the bank, someone in Mr. Baird's family, or Mr. Deering's, say ; one of their servants, perhaps some discharged servant ; suppose he plans to rob the bank? Now, if he is someone who knows Matchin well, knows his habits, and so on, and that, somewhere in Pomfret, at Mr. Baird's or at Beechwood maybe, he has a *confederate!* Now, let us suppose that this person leaves town, or lives out of town, *how* could he do what was done that night? There's a train that comes into town, by the east branch, at evening, about dusk ; and, a couple of miles away, it runs slowly around that high, curving embankment, because of a milk station just beyond. Now, our man can drop off while the train rounds that curve *easily!* He can walk into Pomfret, or hide in the woods. At the right time, or what he thinks the right time, he approaches the bank, and, if he is a good mimic, he can imitate the voice of Mr. Baird or Bruce Deering, say ; or he may be so well known that Matchin, who is said to have been very honest—and unsuspecting, opens the door for a moment's talk with him, or, perhaps, to receive some trumped-up message ;—there he is, gentlemen ! Now, perhaps, they quarrel. He knocks the old man down, and, leaving him for dead, tries his hand at the safes ; then he hears footsteps. Deering comes along—he enters,'—you know the rest."

"That," said Ingram, as Murtagh paused a moment, "was your *theory?*"

"That was *both theory and fact.*" He turned toward the jury and addressed himself to them. "Gentlemen, day after day I lounged, and picked up items of gossip ; and evenings I tortured Mr. Baird to get the history of men, women, and children connected with the Deerings. When I wanted information about Mr. Baird's family, I inquired *elsewhere.*" Mr. Baird smiled behind his hand. "And I fairly haunted the road to Beechwood. I had fixed my mind upon no one in particular, when one day I discovered that a person, with none too honest an appearance, was making visits, one or two, at least, to Beechwood, in the absence of master and mistress ; of all, as I soon found out, except two or three servants left in that great house.

"At this same time I had got another idea in my head. Every time I asked myself, 'What became of the man whom Deering met—at the door of the bank?' I found myself looking at the big church of St. Mark's *right opposite*, and thinking 'what *a good place to hide in!*' And I wondered that everybody else did not think the same ! Well, I got a key of the church door, and one night I visited that church. I found there *proofs* that someone had been concealed in the closet behind the—tower." He had almost said "the big organ," and it seemed to him that Ora Wardell's lips moved as she stared straight at him. "There were fragments of lunches, and, better yet, part of a newspaper; a *New York paper, dated the morning before the murder.*"

The foreman of the jury leaned forward. "Have you those proofs?" he queried.

"Mr. Redding has them all, sir. And now, as much of this will have to be repeated, I will hasten on. I was puzzled at first, fearing

hat my bird had flown the town. But I had found *another* clue, and *that* took me to Beechwood.—Mr. Deering, senior, before his death, was much interested in this search, and was a firm believer in his nephew's innocence, and so, when I discovered that a woman in Mr. Deering's employ received a *secret message* on the day after the murder, and that she had destroyed a telegram from her employer, and obliged them to remain in Pomfret overnight, declaring that she *did not know* of their coming, I began to study her closely, and to inquire into her history.

"There came a time when I felt justified in asking Mrs. Deering to let me enter her family in some disguise; and, knowing how anxious her husband had been—for this was after Mr. Deering's death—she permitted me to masquerade as 'Mr. Holly,' as you see me; and there, in the character of Mr. Holly—a partly deaf and very funny old fellow—I *found the truth at last;* but *not* without the aid of *others*, whom I need not name now. I had learned that, on the night of the murder, a man had, in deed and truth, dropped from the train at the east embankment, and stopped at a farmhouse to beg a drink of milk and some bread; and while at Beechwood, I found out that the woman under suspicion had received at one time a visit from a man of her own race, who had sought Mr. Deering's patronage, and been refused it. This man proved to be a *rascal;* and it was known that there was some relationship between the woman and him. Now it chanced that Mrs. Deering had been robbed of some article of value; and it was this robbery that helped us to a conclusion.

"The suspected woman was a somnambulist, and, through the aid of Doctor Felix Ware, this malady was turned to our use. In her sleep the woman led us to the place where she had hidden Mrs. Deering's possessions, and confronting her in the act of removing them, we obtained from her *a confession in full.* Your honour, and gentlemen and ladies, it was *the son of the woman* known as Sarita Pinchon, and commonly called Madam Sarita—*it was her son* who killed Joe Matchin! And the woman's confession, in the hands of Mr. Ingram there, will tell *its own story.*"

CHAPTER LVIII.

A MESSAGE FROM THE DEAD.

IT was written in the firm upright hand of Lawyer Ingram, and, beginning with the day and date, read as follows:—

"In the name of God, and as I hope to be forgiven, after much penance and an age of purgatory, I, Zelie Sarita Pinchon, native of Saint Auvertin in France, declare and vow, that all herein set down is true, *so help me God!*

"I am forty-nine years old, and I was very poor—wretchedly poor—with a little baby at my breast, and only my sister Marie, older than I, and very harsh to me because I could not work much, and because

of my baby, my little Pierre. We were alone, and Marie nursed the sick when she could. One day she came to me and told me that if I would leave my baby with her, I could go to America and live at ease, taking care of an American lady's little one—the lady being too ill to care for her child. The lady was so ill that we could not sail for weeks, and at last we went, instead, to the south of France from Paris, and then to other places ; but the lady died abroad, and I came to America and cared for the babe.

"No one can say I did not do my duty by the child, and Mr. Deering never found a word of fault with me, never. But was it strange that I should love my own boy, and save my money for him, and want him near me? I think not.

"Ten years ago I sent for my—Pierre, and he came to see me at Beechwood. I called him my *brother*, and he would have stayed here, perhaps, and been good, but Mr. Deering was not pleased with him, and I had to give him more money and send him away.

"I can't tell how my boy lived when he was away from me, but he got into trouble, and I sent him money, and helped him all I could. I saw him, too, though they never knew when, nor *how often;* and it was natural that he should get to know about the bank and the family—many things. I am ill, and I cannot remember everything. The doctor says I must hasten.

"The last time I saw my boy, *before that time*, was months ago, six, or maybe seven, and when he went away he was in a reckless mood, and he said, when he came again he would make a 'demand' for some of 'those bank funds,' for him and for me.

"As God hears me, we never met again—after that night when we talked in the darkness of the park, months ago—until he came to me in the night, and told me I must hide him, for he had killed Joe Matchin in the bank, and had hidden a day and two nights in the church. He had written to me that he was coming, and when I heard of the Matchin murder, I was half dead with fear. That is why I kept the people from coming home, and lied to them about the telegraphic message. My son was lame and ill, and I could not let them come that night; I had sent the other servants away, and contrived to get Mr. Bruce to go to his rooms in town; and I offered to do Mrs. Merton's work, too, so that she might pay a visit; and all that I might have my son to myself for one little while.

"I hid him in the north attic, where no one ever went, and there kept him. Those were happy hours, after all; until *they* came home. Then, one dark and stormy night, he went away, and I have lived in a hell ever since!

"After all, what have I done that any mother would not do likewise? And there is nothing more that I need to tell. Of myself I would never have robbed Mrs. Deering. I robbed her hoping to benefit my son. I have told this because I see now that it would all be known in any case, and it *might* have been made to seem worse for my son and for me; when people are down in the world their sins are never made to seem *less!* Besides—the detective, whom, all along, I have thought to be one stupid, disagreeable, old man, has found out *everything!* He has watched us both, and he says my son is now a

prisoner. He was never strong, and ought to have had an easy life, and plenty of money always. He was never meant to work with his white, slim hands! He is ill now, and if they keep him in prison he will die, I know! It is because they have *promised* to spare him, and to be *good to him* in his illness, that—I have consented to make this statement. And here I say, as my last word—*Bruce Deering is not guilty!* and all that he said about that night *is true!* As to the church, *he* had waited there, near the little rear door, early before *it* happened—and he knew the door was not locked. And now, I have said enough. Whatever else I may have done, I hate myself worst for this, for saying with my own lips, this, that I here *have said.* To me it is my greatest sin, to betray my boy. But it was already known, or death could not have opened my lips; not death by torture! And now that I have done this, to set Bruce Deering free, I say to him, and to all, unless he spares my boy, unless the promises made by *his friends* are *kept*, I will curse them all! and *him* most of all, from the Hades, where soon I will be. For myself I ask no grace! I am guilty with him, and to share his prison and his grave, is all the happiness I ask or wish.

"(Signed) ZELIE SARITA PINCHON."

Thus ran the strange confession, that struck court and jury dumb with amazement, and brought to a summary conclusion the long anticipated "trial for life of one of Pomfret's leading citizens."

Not for a moment was the strange tale doubted. Mr. Ingram, when the detective had ceased speaking, had risen in his place, and, holding the paper in his hand, had said to the jury:

"Gentlemen, all that this witness has said is true. He has accomplished that for which every lover of justice should thank him! But I will say no more upon that subject; it is too prolific! It is now *my* turn to occupy the witness-stand. Mr. Redding, will you take my place?"

In his character of witness, Mr. Ingram told how he had been watching, step by step, the workings of this strange case, and how, at last, he had been called upon to take down the deposition or confession which he held up to the view of all, and which, he affirmed, had not left his possession for an instant since.

"It is," said he, "a *verbatim* statement written just as the words came from the woman's lips—the only omissions being explanations in her own tongue and repeated sentences or words. I have known this woman during a residence here of twenty years and more; and I know that this paper contains *the terrible truth*, and might have been written in her heart's blood. It was sworn to by herself, and was witnessed by Mrs. Merton, Doctor Ware, and Thomas Wells. Gentlemen,"—he bent forward and put the confession into Redding's extended hand—"Mr Redding will now receive this confession, to be used in evidence."

And then John Redding broke the seal, and read Sarita's confession—to which judge, jury, and audience listened in utter, awe-struck silence.

It was not done at once; the law must abate none of her routine

or dignity. There were questions without number bubbling up now in the minds of the jury, although afterwards it was remembered by a few, that the lawyers took no part in this catechism unless, perhaps, it was to turn and parry a delicate point; for there was in this strange case much interesting evidence which must not be brought forward for the public benefit, seeing that justice could get on very well without it.

Doctors Ware and Liscom both testified to Sarita's sanity, also to her illness. Mrs. Merton added her evidence as regards the illness and the sleep-walking; and Redding deftly drew from her reminiscences of the visit of that "Pierre Pinchon," who "called himself Sarita's brother," and who had gone away from Beechwood, as Mrs. Merton very well remembered, "scowling and angry, because Mr. Deering would not employ him or let him stay about the place."

Murtagh and his helpers were making a grand effort to acquit Bruce Deering, and fix the guilt upon an unknown, without letting the name of Brook Deering be so much as uttered in court, and in this they succeeded by much diplomacy, *finesse*, and clever "tacking," in which they were greatly aided by the discreet silence of Mr. Cole, who, once convinced that Bruce Deering was an innocent man, willingly refrained, at Mr. Ingram's request, from going too deeply into detail, which would "avail nothing," and would "greatly distress innocent persons here present."

It was a strange ending of a criminal prosecution. The jury did not leave their seats in order to pronounce a verdict of not guilty.

For the last hour or more order had been preserved with much difficulty; and when the verdict was announced the building rang again and again with the hurrahs of the men who had come to hear Bruce Deering condemned for murder.

As for Bruce himself, he was too thoroughly dazed by the strangeness of the story to which he had just listened to realise in full how much this freedom meant to him; and he knew, too—none better—that, for him at least, the mystery was not at an end. There was something behind this half-told tale, and he could not believe himself a free man, or take advantage of his liberty, until he understood the enigma which was being so strangely manipulated by this puzzling detective and his aids.

They had pronounced him a free man; but where was the other? the one who should be in his place?

In reply to a question, Murtagh had said, "No; we do *not* hope to learn more from the mother of Pierre Pinchon; but *I* am not alone in this case; others are, and have been, working faithfully, and I am informed that this man, who has been watched for and traced in many places, is *now* in custody and ill, even as his mother has said. I shall go to him *at once*, and if he is identified and can be removed, I shall be only *too* happy, on my part, to wash my hands of him and hand him over to Sheriff Carton."

It will be observed that our detective worded his remarks discreetly, and that he bound himself by no promises.

But if Bruce Deering was amazed, and in doubt, he was not—alone. Brenda, Valentine, and Ora Wardell, all went out from that hall of justice wondering and anxious, ready almost to doubt the evidence of their own senses; and they, too, saw clearly, one thing at least, this case was *not* ended. There was more suspense, more anxiety, more misery, perhaps, behind this most singular closing of "The Matchin Murder Trial."

As they arose to leave the hall, Brenda was met by Mr. Baird.

"I have a carriage in waiting," he said courteously; "and it is *necessary* that you and Miss Rodney meet the lawyers and Mr. Murtagh at my house. It is business of an important *and private* nature."

A moment later, Murtagh came close behind Ora Wardell, where she stood waiting for the crowd to open a way for her, and said: "Miss Wardell, are you strong enough to endure more? Will you trust me when I say that I honestly want to spare you pain, and to help you? Will you come with us to Mr. Baird's house at once and hear *all* the truth? I know that *you* believe this to have been a *farce;* but, as God hears me, *Bruce Deering is innocent!*"

"I will go," said Ora, with icy haughtiness, and turning at a touch, she saw John Redding beside her.

"Will you take my arm?" he said.

. . . . . .

In Mr. Baird's long library they soon come together again, the host and Bruce's three lawyers, Murtagh, Ware, and Bruce himself. They are gathered in a semi-circle around the long library table, and, at one end, a little apart, sits Brenda Deering, Val Rodney, and Ora Wardell.

Mr. Baird holds a place at the end of the table opposite the ladies, and Bruce sits beside Valentine. They have entered silently and taken the places indicated; and now, to the surprise of at least four, Mr. Baird rises.

"We have just passed through a strange experience," he begins, addressing himself to the group of four at the further end of the table, "and, to some of us, it has seemed a hateful puzzle; perhaps a farce. Ladies, all, and you, Deering, it is my duty to tell you that, except for your four selves, we all know the *meaning* of what has just passed; and *you* are here to hear it from us. This gentleman," pointing to Murtagh on his right, "has just carsied to a successful issue one of the most difficult cases upon the whole record of detective triumphs. He has cleared the name of an innocent man, without revealing to the public the identity of the *guilty* one; *not* to screen the guilty, understand! but to save an honourable and always stainless *name* from dishonour! That name is *Deering!* Wait," as Bruce seemed about to speak, "hear me out, I beg! All that was said in yonder court-room, said, and sworn to, *was true;* absolutely *true!* but *not all* of the truth. That which it could not benefit a curious public to hear must be told now. Bruce! Mrs. Deering! Is it *possible* that you are not, in part, prepared for what I am about to say? Can you associate guilt with *no name* save that of Pierre Pinchon? If Pierre Pinchon is guilty of Joseph Matchin's death, *so is—Brook Deering!*"

"*Brook!*" gasped Brenda; and she dropped her face upon two trembling hands.

"NEVER!" came from Ora Wardell's lips, and her eyes flashed fire. But Val Rodney only dropped her eyes, and Bruce sat immovable as iron.

"I *beg* of you—" Mr. Baird intercepted the words about to burst from Ora Wardell's lips—"I *beg* that you will not interrupt me! When I have *done*, all may speak who will, and nothing shall go unexplained."

He turned his gaze upon Mrs. Deering.

"Not long ago, madam, you were consulted about a certain paper given you by your husband, shortly before his death; not to be opened save under certain circumstances, and when opened, its contents to remain a secret, or not, according as certain persons proved themselves worthy, or unworthy.

"After close study of the crime, of the *two* crimes, which he has been seeking to trace to their source, our detective became convinced that *this paper*, which in the meantime had been stolen from you, held, perhaps, the clue, or the key, to the whole miserable business. Mr. Ingram had hinted to you that there might be a duplicate, and when we had convinced ourselves that this was the case, Mr. Murtagh consulted with you and found that you refused to commit what you, in your womanly honesty, considered a breach of faith with the dead, and for a time it seemed that the wheels of our progress were clogged; for, while we honoured your resolute clinging to what you believed right, we could not, of course, ask Mr. Ingram to grant what you had denied us! Nor would he have consented if we had. But it was written that the truth should come to light at last; and, after watching the woman Sarita, as you have heard, Mr. Murtagh and Doctor Ware surprised her in the act of removing, or destroying, the stolen document."

Brenda's hands had fallen from her face, and she seemed about to rise and interrupt him, but Mr. Baird hurried on.

"Mrs. Deering, the stolen article referred to in Sarita's confession, or rather by Mr. Murtagh, consisted of the paper left in your charge by your husband, and a copy of a will, made nearly ten years ago—the duplicate of which Brook Deering produced at the reading of Mr. Deering's last words and wishes—not knowing that a *later* will was in existence—he having searched his father's desks for such a document without success. There were, also, three or four letters, from Brook Deering to Sarita. These papers Mr. Murtagh and his friend brought at once to myself and Mr. Redding, and we all, with Mr. Ingram, took counsel concerning this paper from your husband's hand. The seal was broken, and after much hesitation, and believing Brook guilty, we decided that Mr. Ingram, as your husband's oldest friend and adviser, should examine the paper—at least so far as to ascertain *if it would aid us* in any manner—and that *he* should judge whether we might be made aware of its contents or not; whether, in fact, it would *help us*.

"Mrs. Deering, that document gives us the key to the *whole horrible riddle!* It furnishes the *motive* for *both* crimes, and it gives us the only

ray of light, the only scant comfort possible in the case. The *name* and the blood of Deering are still unspotted; blameless! The man we have called Brook Deering is the son—*the illegitimate son of Sarita Pinchon!* adopted, abroad, to fill the place of a dead babe, and so save its mother from insanity. We are all friends here—will you take the advice of Mr. Ingram, of all of us, and allow this paper to be read, first to yourself, and then, with your permission, to all here?"

For a moment it seemed doubtful if she had so much as heard his last words, so dazed and strange she looked. Then, as she made a movement as if to rise, Doctor Ware sprang up and reached her side in time to proffer an arm. She rose, trembling in every limb, and Mr. Baird drew aside the curtain, before the door of the little alcove room where he sometimes sat to write, in private, and to smoke at will. Mr. Ingram followed, and when Ware had placed her in an easy-chair, and she had assured him that she was quite strong again, he returned with Mr. Baird to the library.

It seemed a long time that they sat waiting, for no one felt inclined to talk, in the midst of so much uncertainty, and Valentine was on the point of rising, and her anxious face was turned toward the alcove—from whence, now and then, came a sound, as of sobbing that could not be suppressed—when the curtain was drawn back, and Mr. Ingram came out alone.

He carried in his hand the envelope with the broken seal; and he resumed his seat, and drew from its cover a folded sheet, before he opened his lips—then:

"Mrs. Deering has requested me to read this paper to you at once," he said. "She begs that you will excuse her absence, during the reading; and, especially, that she may be left to herself. She is quite calm now, but she has received a great shock; and I quite comprehend her wish to be left to rest, and recover herself alone. There is no need for further explanation, this," holding up the now open paper, "is the document—written by my friend, Lysander Deering, stolen from Mrs. Deering, and recovered from Sarita Pinchon so recently. It will explain itself; and Mrs. Deering *now* quite agrees with me, that the time for making known its contents *has come*, and that it was *anticipated*, by the writer, long since."

And then, slowly and gravely, he read this strange letter from the hand of the dead:—

"My Dearly Beloved Wife,—When these lines are read by you, and I pray it may not be for long years, if ever,—but *when* the time comes for you to peruse this, I shall be in the beyond, which, I believe and trust, is, after all, not far from any of us. I shall then, if it is permitted to the translated to know and be near their loved ones, be very near to you; for you will read as I now write, sadly, with a troubled heart.

"In my *own* life, my wife, my personal deeds, yes, and *thoughts* also, are all known to you—an open book whose pages you have ever turned at will. Only *one* secret of my life have I withheld from you; and that because it concerned another, quite as much, yes, more, than myself. This other is Brook Deering.

"You know of the unhappy malady that shadowed all the later years of the life of my first wife; a short life at best; and you know that, after all that human care and skill could do, she *died insane.* But not—thank God—the maniac, violent—and horrible to herself and all others, that she might have become, but for the deceit of which I am about to tell you, which, to save her reason, was practised upon her.

"We were in Paris, when my child,—my only son, was born; and, upon our arrival, I had secured a nurse, Marie Pinchon by name, to care for my wife. She had been very delicate for months, and, at times, slight indications that the dreaded malady was lurking in her blood, had alarmed us, and made us, myself and her maid, that is, very watchful. I had consulted a skilled physician, and was warned that there might be a crisis soon. 'If her child is born living, and in health,' he said, 'if the mother makes a good recovery, and the little one thrives, I believe that all will go well, and that your wife will be much stronger, mentally and physically—perhaps quite cured. But, if the child should not live, and I must tell you, frankly, that its chances are only as one to twenty, she will be a hopeless lunatic.'

"Brenda, can you not imagine what followed? I begged the physician to help me, and to save my wife's life and reason; and then he made me see the one only way.

"'The child,' he said, 'must not die! In Paris all things are possible; and children are born every day; we must find a child—at the right time—and of the same age, or very near it; and, if your babe dies, she must never know it!' At first it seemed horrible to me; and then, gradually, I began to look upon the thought as a very salvation. Better, far better, I thought, to take and rear as my own, a stranger, an alien child, than to leave in some foreign prison asylum, perhaps, an insane wife; and then I began to fear that this plan might fail, for, of course, the child to be substituted, if the worst came, must be found, and soon. Marie Pinchon was a trained nurse; she had been sent me by the physician, and he called her into our counsels; she had lately been in a woman's hospital, she told us; and, after some consideration, she thought she could do what we wished.

"She would visit this hospital, and was sure she could find us a child there; there were only *too many* waifs, she said.

"I made but one stipulation, if possible, the waif, if it came to that, must be a *boy*, and in perfect health.

"I have told you enough of this wretched episode. My son never breathed; and a boy, tiny, it is true, but sound and pretty, was brought by the nurse, Marie, and put into my wife's arms as soon as she was strong enough to realise or ask for her babe. Then, when we looked for a nurse, Marie again came to our aid. After some difficulty and delay, she told us of a *cousin widow*, who had lately lost a babe, and whose husband had been killed by an explosion at Marby, and so it came about that we found Sarita, who proved a perfect nurse, and with whom my wife was delighted. The babe was christened Holbrook Deering, and he grew and thrived, and was a dainty and beautiful child; blonde, like my wife, for which I was very glad; she fairly worshipped him, and was very happy until he was six months old, and we were thinking of setting sail for home—she had grown so much stronger in

the warm air of Southern France, for we had left Paris, by the doctor's orders, as soon as possible—and just then the boy was taken ill; it was only the croup, and not a severe case; but it so frightened my poor wife that she went into convulsions, and by the time the boy was well, *she* was *hopelessly* insane, not constantly so; there were lucid intervals of very short duration; but the doctor said they would not last, and that there was *no* chance for recovery.

"It was a mild form of mania, and I learned to thank Heaven for that before she died.

"In one of her last moments of sanity she talked with me about the child, and asked me to bring Sarita with me to America if she would come. She called Sarita, and, herself, proposed this to her. At first Sarita demurred, and did not want to leave '*La belle France*,' but after a time she yielded. I did not at first feel drawn toward the woman, quite the contrary, in fact. Though my wife declared that she really *loved* little Brook, I felt that the large sum I offered her was the real bait. However, she came, and I have had no reason to regret it. She has been a very faithful nurse to Brook, as infant, child, and youth, and seems to have grown deeply attached to him.

"And now comes the most unpleasant part of this task; all of the above I have meant that you should know in any case, for to be quite candid, Brenda, while I have meant to do my full duty by Brook, and never meant him to be undeceived, or to know that I was not, in truth, his father, I could not help loving my brother's noble boy, who has the Deering face and voice—his *father's* face and voice, and the Deering *heart. I could not help loving him* BEST. I have meant, since Bruce first came to me, to give them equal shares of my estate at my death, that is to say, my wife, to you, first of all in my love and care, two-thirds of everything; to the boys, the remainder equally divided. Whether this intent is carried out, will rest first with Brook, and then with you; yes, so far as he is concerned, it shall rest with you to give or withhold under certain conditions.

"Brook has disappointed me sadly! I have seen his extravagance from the first, since his earliest school days; abroad he has always lived ahead of his means. Of late I have had to remonstrate with him, and he has promised, in that soft, amiable way of his, promised and failed again and again. But that is not all, nor is it the worst!

"I have long had my doubts and suspicions; but, one day not long before Brook went abroad, old Joe Matchin came to me and told me a shameful tale. Rose Matchin had then been missing for months, and Brook was in New York. Matchin told me that he had found certain letters, addressed to Rose, that had been hidden under the old flooring of the room which had been hers. He had taken up the boards, intending to replace them with new, and said that the toilet table, or 'bureau,' as he called it, used by the girl, had stood over this spot, and that the letters, doubtless, had fallen out at the back of the rickety old affair, and so found their lodgment beneath the flooring. There had been no carpet in the poor room, only a strip of a rug before the 'bureau,' and the girl, doubtless, was quite unaware of her loss; for she had not left another scrap of writing behind her.

"When Matchin asked me to give him a few words in private after

banking hours, and began his story, he had, as I at once perceived, been drinking, a thing quite unusual for him, and he launched at once into invectives against my nephew *Bruce*, coupling *his* name with that of his runaway niece; and ending by flinging down the letters before me. Never *for one moment* doubting *Bruce*, and thinking the old man half wild with drink, I took up the letters. There were three of them, shameful love-letters, written to Rose Matchin, *signed Bruce*, and *all in Brook Deering's handwriting*.

"I calmed Matchin as well as I could; you know I always have had a strong influence over him—have always, in fact, been his friend—and finally, I extracted from him a promise *not* to speak of this matter, and to leave it with *me* to arrange as best I could. I asked him if he had already made a confidant of anyone, and he answered no, but added that he might have made 'some sort of mention' of Bruce's name at the saloon where he drank his beer. I telegraphed Brook to come home, and then I went home to think.

"You may perhaps remember, dear, the night when I told you that I had been detained at the bank by a matter *no one but myself* could have handled, and that you gave me one of your pretty 'scoldings,' because I had missed the call of Mrs. Arden and the doctor, and made dinner late. It happened that night.

"When Brook came, there was quite a scene, of which you, of course, knew nothing. At first, the scamp tried to lay the matter upon Bruce's shoulders; but when I confronted him with the letters, he threw himself upon my mercy. Owning that Rose, having by some mistake got his name and his cousin's confounded, he had allowed her to call him Bruce, 'thinking it would do no harm.' He declared that he loved the girl, whom I recall as very pretty; and that—he had been 'tempted beyond his strength.' The girl 'was so unhappy, living with that sour old man;' besides, he declared he was entangled,"—here the reader paused, hesitated, and, with a swift glance in the direction of Ora Wardell, resumed—"or had committed himself, long before he knew Rose. In fact, he was engaged, and so dared not see Rose openly. He was willing, yes, anxious, to marry the girl, he declared; only, for all our sakes, he wanted her to be better educated; and if I would permit him to send her to school, etc., etc. In short, it was a wretched, shameful scene. It ended in a compromise; and here, perhaps, I showed myself weak; I told him that I would pay the girl's schooling for two years, if, in the meantime, he would promise me not to see her. They might correspond if they would; and, to insure their separation, I would send him abroad for one year.

"At the end of that year, he was to come back, establish himself somewhere at a distance from Pomfret, where neither his antecedents nor those of Rose Matchin were known; and when Rose had left her school, he should marry her if she still desired him for a husband.

"It seemed to me, *then*, the best thing to do, in justice to the girl and to her honest old uncle, who, in his way, was as proud as I; and it was the—*only* way to keep the disagreeable affair from becoming a public scandal.

"Brook seemed so willing, and so penitent, that I gave him a letter to an acquaintance who was in charge of a girls' school not far from

New York, and who would, I knew, oblige me without question ; and I let him go and arrange to have the girl established. I had, in my letter, asked my friend, the professor, to meet, or send someone to meet, Miss Matchin, whom I described as the orphaned grandchild of a friend, and who, having no near relative to look to her, would be put in his charge by a member of my own family. I also insisted upon Brook's setting out for Europe very soon.

"Of course I had told old Joe Matchin what I had done, but he did not seem in the least gratified to know that his niece was in a good school, or soon would be ; and when I told him that he would do well to say to his neighbours that Rose *was* at school, he only sniffed and said, 'Let sleeping dogs lie ! Nobody asks *me* after the gal anymore, and they hadn't *better!* An' *I* ain't goin' to *offer* no one no news, you may be *sartin'!*' And then he added, '*Only*—I *does* want to have *one* square out-an'-out talk—with that boy of your'n—not meanin' no disrespect to *you*, Mr. Deerin'—that I does !' So I left him, and we never mentioned the subject again.

"Rose did not write to the old man. He did not want 'none of her silly book-larned letters,' he declared at the outset ; and I did not hear from the school, except to receive a receipt for her quarter's tuition and other expenses.

"So matters went on until not long ago, when Mr. Lenville went to Europe, I asked him to look up Brook—he was then at Nice, where Lenville expected to meet his brother's family — and to give me a *candid* account of the way he was passing his time, and how he was managing to spend *so much* money.

"I have but recently heard from Lenville. He tells me that Brook is gambling at Nice and elsewhere—gambling wildly ! That he is leading a very dissipated life ; and that he has attached himself to Miss—Wardell, in spite of his *fiancée* at school. For her father's sake and for her *own*, I am sorry to hear this last ; I fear the boy has renewed the old affair, *because* he foresees that I shall refuse to continue furnishing him funds to squander ; and he cannot do this honourably. Ora Wardell is not the girl to permit such fickleness as he has been guilty of, once it is known to her ; and how he can contrive to deceive her long, I cannot imagine. Certainly he must intend *some* form of treachery ; and if he thinks to trifle with Rose Matchin it will not be safe for him to come back to Pomfret and confront old Joe Matchin. Neither would *I* permit such perfidy.

"*Later.*

"Brenda, I find that Brook has drawn upon my bankers in New York, without my knowledge, for a large amount, *using my name;* and that he has also borrowed from Lenville. I have written to him, bidding him come home, and shall try to cover up and condone his misdemeanours *upon these terms.* He must withdraw from his present position relating to Miss Wardell, even if he is obliged to throw himself upon her mercy, and confess the truth to her. Ora Wardell would soon find him out, and would learn to despise a man so weak. *She* is *too good* for him ! And Rose Matchin, I am convinced, with all her folly, is *good enough.* You see, my wife, it has come to *this*, that *I now thank Heaven that he is not my son!*

"In all this, first and last, I see how I have made two great mistakes. First, I did not—as I should have done—learn something of the boy's *parentage;* find out *what blood* was in him; what possibly inherited evil tendencies; and, last, it would have been wiser to have let the *truth* be *known*—the truth of his adoption. But my poor wife had bound me by so many promises for his future, and the news had gone out to all our friends, that we had a son and heir; and then—I never *dreamed*—how should I?—that my only brother's orphan child would ever become as my own.

"And now for my *object* in telling you all this—and in this manner. There are times when I doubt the outcome of Brook's misdeeds, and fear the *worst* is not yet; and so I have written this, and shall leave it in your hands, to be kept, *unopened*, as you receive it, until after my death.

"In the meantime, Brook will have had time to prove himself, for better or for *worse;* and this paper will be in your hands, to be opened as I have verbally directed—*should it be for worse;* which God forbid!—or, to remain under seal—should the need to open it and, perhaps, protect yourself or another,—never occur,—until the day comes for the reading of my will. You will *then* read *this* also, and hold it as a family secret, to be guarded; or a weapon for your own defence at need.

"Should this time come—rather, *when* it comes—if Brook Deering has fulfilled his obligations, and is living the life of an honest, industrious gentleman; having kept his pledge to the girl who is fitting herself to be his wife, *then* these facts concerning his parentage, and his misdemeanours, may be consigned to oblivion. But—if he has *not* kept his word, if any further act, any darker stain touches, through him, the name of Deering, *then that name must be no longer his! The truth must be made known!* No alien shall bring a stain upon the name that has always been honoured, and still keep it! As for *himself*, I have decided. The letter which calls him home, also tells him *the truth* concerning his parentage, and makes known to him the *only terms* upon which he may continue to call me *father.*

"I have assured him, to save his pride and make his reform easier, that *so long as he keeps his word, and does his duty*, the truth concerning him will be kept between himself and me. And *this* is why I have written this letter, and hedged it round with conditions. So long as he continues to honour the name he bears, you will bury all this in your own memory, as if it had never been, I *know;* and he need never know that this document exists.

"And now for myself; while I long to believe in the lad I have called my son for twenty-four years, and while I hope *and pray* that the *worst* is over, and that good may come out of evil,—yet—these lines would never have been penned, if I did not *fear* and *dread*—I know not what! I want to guard you against misfortune, against ingratitude; and—I know the weak points in the character of him with whom we have to deal.

"I have made a duplicate of this, and leave it in the hands of Mr. Ingram. *He* will know when to put it into your hands, without knowing its contents."

Mr. Ingram paused here, and put down the paper.

"The remainder of this writing," he said, "is of a purely private nature, and concerns only Mrs. Deering—the last advice, instructions, and farewell words of the dead—in which *Brook Deering* has no part. And now, if Mrs. Deering is quite ready to rejoin us, we will finish, as soon as possible, our work of explanation."

As he spoke, Valentine and Doctor Ware arose quickly, and then, both hesitated. In that moment of hesitation, John Redding leaned forward, and, catching Valentine's eye, made a slight gesture, accompanied by a meaning glance, toward the place where Ora Wardell sat, her proud head bowed upon her hands.

Instantly Valentine turned back, nodded to Ware, and took the vacant chair nearest to Ora, a look of sweet compassion in her eyes, and Doctor Ware crossed the room alone, and knocked softly at the door of the smoking-room.

CHAPTER LIX.

ORA'S "*AMENDE HONOURABLE.*"

WHEN Mrs. Deering was once more in her place—or rather in the seat vacated by Valentine, who still sat very near to Ora Wardell, slightly leaning toward her, and with one little hand resting upon the arm of her chair, John Redding broke the anxious silence.

"Before going into anything else," he began, "it will be well, I think, to finish with the proofs against Brook Deering, as we have called him for so long. And this is Mr. Murtagh's business."

And then Ferriss Murtagh reviewed for them his work, from the beginning, and his reasoning thereupon.

"As I go over the ground, which is only too familiar to some of you, do not hesitate to question me. I want to make everything as clear as possible to each of you," he had said in beginning his review. But it seemed, at first, that it was to be a monologue, so silent were they all.

But when he had reached the point where, in company with Mr. Baird, they had discovered the half handkerchief, the hatchet and the fact of the burglary of the safes, Bruce himself broke in upon him with a quick gesture.

"I want to ask," he began as Murtagh paused, "*why* you did not make these discoveries known?"

Murtagh smiled. "We were at the very beginning of the case," he said, "and I already saw that we had to do with a clever rogue. To have made all our discoveries known at *that point* would have been unwise. As for the hatchet, that was the property of Mr. Baird, and of no use, therefore, as an aid to identification. It was simply an implement ready to the hand of the assassin. Knowing this, and seeing that it would be most disagreeable to Mr. Baird to have his hatchet given such ghostly prominence, we simply shut it up in the vault. It was not necessary to the case—in fact, it was *worse* than

useless. As to the handkerchief, *that* was my first *actual* clue, and I had no notion of proclaiming it upon the housetops."

"How do you mean—a first clue?"

Murtagh quickly produced from a capacious pocket a package, which he opened hastily, while he said: "It gave me a hint, which I hardly dared to accept—and use, at first. It set my thoughts galloping in the right direction. It had upon one corner the initials, B. D.," he took from the now open package a folded piece of linen, and held it up to view; "and, seeing them, I said to myself if Bruce Deering is innocent it behoves *me* to find out the other B. D.s in Pomfret."

The half-square of linen was stained and soiled, just as when it was taken from the register, and, after a moment's hesitation, Bruce reached across the table and took it in his hand.

"Let *me!*" he started at the words, hoarse and low uttered, just opposite him. Ora Wardell had lifted her head, for the first time since the truth had forced its way to her unwilling mind; and now, with a face that was death-like in its pallor, with white drawn lips, and eyes that were at once burning and woeful, she held out a hand with the prints of the clenched nails distinct in the soft palms.

Bruce leaned across the table, and, without a word, laid it before her.

It was the finest, the softest of linen, and the two initials might have been wrought into its softness with fairy fingers. Ora caught it up, held it smooth and straight between her fingers, bent her head over it, and, after a long look, let it drop from her hands, and once more bowed her face upon them.

The silence that followed was broken by Mr. Baird.

"As regards the robbery of the safe," he explained, "I confess that, at first, my only thought was that if this became *known* it would strengthen the case against Bruce, who might be supposed to know the combinations by which they were opened; when Mr. Murtagh agreed that we need not make the robbery known, I felt much relieved. Of course, you understand why these things were *afterwards* withheld from the public?" He nodded to the detective, who at once resumed his subject.

"I fancied," he began once more, "that I could see how this scrap of linen, with those tell-tale initials, came where I found them. Matchin had been stunned by the blows, and left for dead, while the safes were attacked. The fellow must have secured his booty quite deliberately; and, while concealing it upon his person, observed the blood stains, and taking out his handkerchief, used it to remove some of them—then, as he is about to throw away the bloody thing, he thinks of the initials, and hastily tears it in two pieces. Now, while there is evidence that he *began* deliberately, there is also evidence that, at the last moment, he was alarmed, and fled hastily. The alarm came, perhaps, as he was about to thrust the blood-stained piece down the register; the other half he may have kept, or used for a mask, or to tie up the rolls of gold taken from the vault,—if he meant to conceal the unmarked piece of linen, and he must, in his haste, have thrust in the wrong half. That is how I reasoned, *then*. Afterwards I pondered whether someone might not have put that marked piece of linen there purposely, to throw suspicion upon Mr. Bruce

Deering. That was after I had learned that one Jonas Wiggins had picked up a cuff button on the steps of the bank, just after the alarm was given, and that this button, also, bore the initials B. D."

Brenda looked up quickly.

"Have you cleared up *that* mystery?" she asked eagerly.

"Entirely. You had given such a button to Brook Deering once on a time, and its *mate* to Bruce; they were made at Tiffany's?"

"Yes," said Brenda, "there was a full set, and Brook, who admired jewels like any woman, often teased me, half in jest I thought, to give him one of the buttons. When they were setting out for school, together, for their last year, Brook begged for keepsakes from all of us, and I then gave an amethyst cuff button to each."

"Thank you, Mrs. Deering," said Murtagh, and then he told them how, by introducing Rosa into the house in the character of Valentine's maid, he had not only been able to keep a closer watch upon Sarita, but had found that the jewels had been made at Tiffany's; and how they had learned, through Doctor Ware, that duplicates of the cuff buttons had been made for a person, who, doubtless, was Brook himself.

"By this time," he went on, "I had learned a good deal about Brook Deering, and had included him among my possibilities. The fact that he was supposed to be abroad did not weigh so heavily with *me* as it naturally would with those less familiar with the tricks of criminals and crooks.

"My position, as you will see, was a peculiar one. Engaged by Mr. Baird to *prove* the innocence of Bruce Deering, I had reached the fixed conclusion that Joe Matchin's death lay at the door of *one* of these two cousins, who bore the same name. Now, when I considered Brook's case, I had nothing—nothing, that is, but the handkerchief and the button, to charge against him. He was absent, and no motive could be imagined—except that rumour about Rose Matchin. But—on Bruce Deering's side, while the torn handkerchief, the button, and the rumour about the girl applied as well to *him* as the other, there was, *also*, all the circumstantial evidence brought forward at the inquest. The weight of *proof*, you see, was heavy on his side; while, on the other, the side of Brook Deering, there was so little, so mere a nothing, that I *dared not* venture to name my doubt of him, even to Mr. Baird here."

"It is true," interpolated the banker; "and when he *did* suggest such a possibility, I would not at first listen to it; and yet, looking back *now*, I am sure that you believed in Bruce, and doubted Brook from the first."

"True! but not until I had reasoned a way to my faith in the one, and had no alternative left but to doubt the other."

"I wish," besought Bruce, "that you would tell us what those reasonings were?"

"You will be surprised at their simplicity. First, if you were guilty, the man who, I was convinced, had been concealed in the church, must, of course, have been an accomplice; now, I never doubted your mental soundness; and an accomplice would indicate actual stupidity. Besides, experience and statistics have proved that

gentleman criminals never willingly encumber themselves in this way. Again, you would hardly have rung the bell, and called out the town, with an accomplice in hiding under their nose; you would have 'raised the alarm' by a slower method. And then—arithmetic often cuts a figure in these cases. Now it is said that you could not have been more than twelve minutes in advance of these other gentlemen here, in your return from the supper on the hill. Well, first I shut myself up in the room where the murder was done, and I worked out in pantomime the time it would take a man, or two men, to make an entrance, do the deed, secure the booty, and reach the threshold. Time, single-handed, twenty minutes; with accomplice, not five minutes less. Next, I walked from the house on the hill to the bank, fast, as Mr. Deering is supposed to have come; and then slow, as Messrs. Redding and Morse certainly came ten minutes after. Time, fast, eleven minutes; slow, sixteen minutes. You see it wouldn't work. Deering couldn't have done it. Granting that Deering ran and the others sauntered, Deering would be still within the bank when the others came up. Figures are great things, gentlemen."

"And why, with no proof against him, or almost none, did you suspect Brook?" persisted Bruce.

"Because I had studied his character—and found him to have been handsome, too handsome, idle, extravagant, fond of women's society, and one of those smooth, amiable, sweet-spoken, soft-handed, soft-mannered young men, such as I have met before, whose 'ways,' under the smoothness, the velvet touch, the grace and charms, are as the ways of the panther! And because I had begun to suspect two women, who, on the day after the murder, met and exchanged mysterious messages; and who, I had found out, were, both of them, warm friends of Brook Deering; one—" turning his gaze, very kindly now, towards Ora Wardell—"because she was his mother, and knew all his crimes and his danger; the other, because, like the large-souled woman she was, she trusted him, believed in him as she did in herself, and because she saw in him a martyr, a hero of self-sacrifice. Such a woman has no cause to feel herself humiliated. She is a brave woman, whom I honour, whom all must honour and respect."

There was a low murmur about the table; Valentine's eyes were swimming in tears, and Brenda drew her chair closer to that of Ora's, whose head now rested upon the table before her, and who was shaken with noiseless weeping.

"Let me finish," went on Murtagh, "as briefly as I can; at another time you may ask me for details. Brook Deering was smuggled from the church of St. Mark's, where he had been concealed for days, to the attic of Beechwood, and there he lay hidden until, on the night of the storm and railway wreck, he found his opportunity, and crept out, to come back half an hour later, storm-soaked and limping. He had arrived in New York under cover of a false name; and a woman who came by the same boat, a French adventuress, was enlisted in his service; just what his plans were in reference to Rose Matchin we do not yet know. That they were *evil* plans is quite certain. I have had this woman and the girl, who had been removed from school as soon as they landed almost,—watched—ever since. By following Brook's

messenger to the city, upon an errand which *she* little understood, I first learned their whereabouts. Later, I sent Rosa, Miss Rodney's new maid, to approach them if possible. From the very first the girl has called Brook by his cousin's name, and written to him as *Bruce* Deering. In default of promised funds, or if Brook fails to appear, the result might be a raid for blackmail upon *Bruce Deering*, backed up by letters in a hand closely imitating his, and *signed* by his name. It has all been planned diabolically, and *I* see in it frequent traces of the wily French mother, who for all these years has lived under the same roof with her son, and who deceived Lysander Deering from first to last—"

He paused suddenly. At the foot of the table there was a movement and a sudden sharp exclamation; Ora Wardell had lifted her face, and, after an effort to rise, had sunk, trembling, back into her chair. She was still pallid, to ghostliness, and her face was livid with traces of her mental sufferings; but it was softer and humble, almost appealing, when she lifted it to glance quickly about her. She leaned back in her chair, and, after a moment, in which she seemed to gather strength, and command herself, she said:

"Mr. Murtagh, Mrs. Deering, *all* of you, will you let me say what I *must* say, *now* and once for all? While you, Mr. Murtagh, can vouch for so much as you know."

She spoke slowly, and was evidently holding herself under powerful restraint; and Valentine leaned over her and said, gently, appealingly:

"Miss Wardell, Ora, are you strong enough? There is no *need*—!"

She gave Valentine's friendly hand a quick, answering pressure, but she shook her head.

"I must speak *now*," she insisted. "There can never be a better time! You are all very kind; and Mr. Murtagh has tried to spare me. He *has* spared me; and at another time I shall try to thank him. Just now I want to tell my story, once and for all. What Mrs. Deering's letter says was quite true. Brook Deering and I had parted in coldness here, but abroad we became reconciled; we became engaged for the second time; and, very soon, I became his confidante.

"His greatest trouble, he assured me, was the *liaison* of his cousin and 'old Matchin's pretty niece.' He 'was devoted to his cousin,' and wanted to help him. He 'meant to stick by him.' One day he came to me laughing gaily, and exhibiting a pawnbroker's ticket. He had pawned his watch; and, after making merry over it for a time, he confessed that, two hours after receiving his regular remittance from his father's New York bankers, he had sent it all back again to Bruce, who 'was in New York, and in desperate need of a little help.' He made very light of it all, and declared his intention to go through the month as a bohemian. Of course I would not hear of this, and, after some pretence of reluctance, he accepted a loan from me. This was not long before my return in the spring; and he was, even then, growing anxious about his father's ill-health, and planning to come home and surprise them."

She paused, and a long sigh escaped her lips. Then nerving herself anew, she resumed, telling next of Brook's return by stealth, "that

he might see and warn his cousin;" and so on with the story as she had told it to Murtagh, only with more detail and less mercy for herself. How she had concealed him in the church; how she had lied to Tom Wells to throw him off the scent, which, she feared, was coming too close; how she had carried that first message to Sarita, never dreaming that she was holding communication with Brook's mother; how they had plotted to delay the home-coming of the Deerings by "mislaying" the telegram, and how she had gotten Valentine into her own house, because Brook so dreaded her keen eyes; how to make it seem that he was even then in Europe, Sarita had arranged the letter with the foreign postmark, which Val's dog had "torn to bits," and how, still later and in person, she had delivered another "made-up" letter, which was supposed to have been sent to her by mistake.

And here Bruce interposed.

"One moment, please. It's best to clean the ground as we go." While he spoke he was taking a paper from a pocket-book, and opening it he held it out to her. "Did you ever see that before, Miss Wardell?"

It was only a sheet of note-paper, and not more than half written over.

She shook her head, and her pale face flushed, to pale the next moment, as she glanced at it and gave it back to him.

"Never!" she said, "although I suspect its source."

"Thank you." He placed the letter upon the table within the reach of any, or all, and went on: "That letter was fished out from my waste-basket by Sarita, and brought to my uncle by her. It purports to be a warning letter from Brook to me." His lip curled as he pushed the paper away from him.

"Then," declared Ora," I daresay mine was the hand which brought it to Sarita, under cover, and addressed to her." And then, while the others exchanged glances of intelligence, she went on: "It is not an easy task to admit, as I must do, my own folly and weakness! Already I am recalling numerous little things which should have warned me and aroused my suspicion. But—for years—Brook Deering has been in my eyes a man without a fault. Not to own it would be folly, and worse! There is but one reason why a woman who respects herself ventures beyond all the bounds of propriety as I have done! If I implicated myself in a murder, condoned a crime, it was for the sake of the man who was one day to be my husband, and in whom my faith was only too strong! I am not the first woman who has been cheated, deluded, used as a cat's-paw, by the man upon whom she had staked her faith. But that does not make the disillusion less terrible!" Her voice hoarsened and broke. She put a hand to her throat as if she were choking, and her eyelids quivered and fell.

But Ora Wardell was as strong in defeat as she had been in her proudest moments. She lifted her head again, but not haughtily now, and went on, controlling herself by sheer mental force.

"When Mr. Murtagh came to me, and I knew that trouble was coming, I began to realise what I had done and was doing. But I did not regret it; and I made a last effort to communicate with Brook,

and to warn Bruce. As God is my judge, I never for one moment doubted the honour of the man we have called Brook Deering! and I believed Bruce a guilty man! Deeply as I am humbled, intensely as I feel my humiliation, I should be in worse despair if I thought there was one, among you who are here, who could think for one moment that it was possible for me to aid or abet crime! or to feel one spark of tenderness, of regard, for a man whom I *knew* to be a liar and libertine, a robber and assassin!"

She was beginning to speak rapidly now, and a crimson wave was coming and going in her cheek.

"There *are* women, I know, gentle, meek, long-suffering souls, who can love through evil report, as through good, and can forgive scripturally. I am not such a woman; and I thank Heaven for it! If, yesterday, with my faith unshaken, I could have risked my life for Brook Deering, or broken my heart over his dead body—to-day, with the mask torn from him, he is a criminal! only a thousandfold more hateful to me than other criminals, as he has injured me a thousandfold more than others; and over his dead body I could say—thank God!"

She pushed back her chair and arose.

"Bruce Deering," she faltered; "if I have been deceived and injured, you have been wronged beyond the telling! As one who has aided in this wrong, I ask you to forgive me! It is much to ask, much to grant, for I have nursed my wrath against not you, but the man I believed you to be. But yet I do ask, in all humility, your pardon!—I dare not say your friendship."

"But you have both!" cried Bruce, springing up and extending his hand across the table, "and my sympathy as well! Friendship—loyalty, is not the less noble for being misplaced!"

She put her hand in his in silence; and then, withdrawing it quickly, turned to Murtagh:

"Sir, detective, you have shown me how a man may do his duty and still be a gentleman! You have given me consideration beyond my deserts! I thank you! I thank you *all* for making this hour of my downfall as easy as might be; but—it has not been easy, for all that, and, with your permission, I will go.—No!"—as John Redding and Bruce Deering both moved to follow her; "I beg of you—let me go—quietly—alone!"

The last word was a mere whisper, and she swayed slightly, and caught at the back of the chair beside her; then drawing herself suddenly erect, she moved back a pace, bowed, and walked quickly to the door, which Mr. Baird held open for her egress.

She did not see that, as she passed out, Valentine Rodney was close behind her; but, in the hall, she felt a hand upon her arm, and started almost hysterically; Valentine had caught her arm with both hands.

"Ora! Do not go away alone! Stay, or let me go with you! You must not be alone now! Do you think I don't know? Ah! you have been wonderfully brave and strong! but—you are not strong now! Don't shut yourself up in your pride and suffer alone! Don't—Ora!"

After her start, and that first wild glance, there was a look in Ora's eyes like anger, sudden and fierce; but it died out, and, before Val had ceased to speak, her lips were quivering, and she caught the girl's arm, and made a movement toward the door.

"Come!"—she said brokenly; "I *should die*—if I were left alone—*now!*"

CHAPTER LX.

NEMESIS.

BROOK DEERING sat alone by the west window in his own room, and listlessly watched the clouds floating fleecily across the face of the sinking sun. The house was very still; it had been still all day; and since morning, he had been, except for his attendant, quite alone.

All the morning, and a part of the afternoon, William had been in attendance in the little room by which his chamber was approached from the corridor—and which Wells would call the "anty-room." Brook had been somewhat restless, but by no means talkative. Once, near noon, when William was breathing hard, and seemed to be napping, he had gone softly to the door, and turned the knob; but it did not open, and was evidently locked.

He went back to the window and looked down into the rose garden. The roses were fading, and the white foot-paths were pink and red and yellow with falling petals. Moving about among the bushes, but always, it might have been observed, in sight of the windows of his room, was a man, a stranger, and, apparently, a gardener; at least, he was snipping off the faded roses, very leisurely indeed, and throwing them into a long wicker-basket.

All day he had been doing this, or something else about the rose garden; and, all the time, he was visible from Brook's windows. After a while, when his luncheon was brought him, there was also a cover for William; and it was brought, not by one of the maids, or by Mrs. Merton, with a polite accompanying inquiry, but by a second stranger; and then Brook discovered that, so far from being locked in *by*, as well as with William, they were *both* the prisoners of this silent, strange trencher-bearer.

Late in the afternoon, Tom Wells relieved William, and the door was locked, and the key borne away, as before.

For the past two days Brook had been very silent, and very tractable, with the "rational moments," which had appeared from time to time from the beginning, coming at more frequent intervals.

These "rational intervals" usually occurred upon waking from what seemed like a quiet nap; and, at such times, he would talk quite easily and amiably with his attendant, or the doctor, for a short time; lapsing, by degrees, into flightiness once more, or breaking off with a sudden fit of sullen silence.

When Tom Wells appeared, to relieve William, Brook was at the window which overlooked that portion of the drive-way that ran south-

ward, or toward Pomfret; and while his countenance wore its tamest and least restless look, Wells, nevertheless, quietly noted that his hands were in constant motion, his fingers twitched, and his look of quiet was belied by his frequent marchings to and fro, making the window a turning point, and loitering often there. He made no effort at conversation, irrational or other, and seemed quite unconscious of Tom's presence. Seeing which, that individual drew his chair near a second window, which also commanded a view of the drive, or rather, of the south gate, and a couple of rods of the gravel, and seemed to be absorbed in reading, by the late afternoon light, the daily paper.

Sitting there, he saw, a little before sunset, Bruce Deering, mounted, and accompanied, by John Redding on one side, and young Morse on the other, to the open gate; and a glance at Brook, at the other window, showed that his fingers twitched and clenched themselves convulsively at sight of the quick hand-clasp, unmistakably congratulatory, which Bruce exchanged with both, before he cantered lightly up to the *porte-cochère;* his friends meanwhile riding briskly on toward the north road.

Ten minutes later, the sound of wheels on the gravel caused Brook to turn in his walk and hasten again to the window, in time to see the landau—which had borne away Brenda and Valentine upon the back seat, with "Uncle Holly" and Doctor Ware opposite them—come rolling homeward with only the two men, conversing gravely in the place of the ladies, and the opposite seat vacant; and again the hands were clenched, and the pale lips, in a yet paler face, twitched and became tightly compressed.

A little later, Brook entered the inner room, and fumbling about for a time, came out again with a bunch of cigarettes in his hand, and began to look about for matches. He had smoked for years, "too much for his good," he had often been told; even in his moments of aberration he would light and smoke a cigarette as often as he was permitted.

At first, this had been as often as he chose; but, lately, for a week or more, the cigarettes had been withdrawn almost altogether; and the discomfort and nervousness in consequence was very evident at times, usually, strange to say, during the "rational moments." But to-night the cigarettes had been put in plain sight, upon the mantel of the inner room, and Brook lighted one with only too evident haste.

After the first puff, he withdrew the weed from between his lips, and looked at it inquiringly; then he picked up the package, and took a stealthy glance at the little stamped ribbon which bound them together. Then he bit nervously at an uncut end, and after another pause, began to smoke furiously.

Before the cigarette was consumed, Doctor Ware entered to pay his customary evening visit, and seeing the cigarette, forbade the second which Brook was about to light.

"It won't do!—not now," Ware said; "you've got too much nicotine in your system, and you must go slow; another before you go to bed, and one in the morning—and then we will see how you feel. Mind, Wells, not more than one at bedtime."

From the beginning of his aberration Brook had manifested a desire to keep the greatest possible distance between himself and Doctor Ware, although in his rational moments he welcomed "his physician" eagerly. And now, as the doctor pronounced his dictum, he turned petulantly away, and muttering something unintelligible, entered his bedroom, and threw himself at length upon the bed. A moment later, with great show of slyness, Wells tiptoed to the door between the two rooms, and, partly closing it, began in a half whisper:

"Doc! I don't like to seem to sort o' fluke out; but, somehow, I don't feel just right! My head aches mortally, and my rheumatiz is awful! There was a powerful draught in that dinged old court-room."

"Hu—sh—h—h! Not so loud, Wells!"

"All right! Excuse me, Doc! I was jest goin' to ask if 'twould matter so very much if I did drop to sleep to-night? If I could I'd like, better yet, to be let off to-night. Can't that new feller t'was here this mornin' take my watch jest for once? I tell ye—"

"Not so loud, man! I don't like to trust him, he's so much of a stranger! but—if you can't keep awake—and whoever watches here must keep awake to-night, I suppose we must let you off. If I send the new man up now, do you think you can manage to relieve him by midnight?"

Yes, Wells was sure he could do that; a few hours' rest was all he needed, with, perhaps, a dose of "something for the rheumatiz pain." And so it was settled.

By the time the new man appeared, Brook seemed to be sleeping soundly, and Wells gave him instructions in hoarse whispers just outside the bedroom door.

"You'll have your supper sent up," Wells concluded, "same's at noon; and you ain't to let no one in. And, don't forget, he mustn't have a single cigarette till bedtime. Ten o'clock, you know."

. . . . . .

At half-past six o'clock, Doctor Ware comes into Sarita's room very quietly, and finds Rosa reading by the open window. She starts as he enters, as if confused, and glances toward the bed.

"I declare! if she hasn't fallen asleep!" she murmurs, coming toward him. "Come in, doctor. She's been very quiet,—and her nerves, I think, are stronger—quite strong! Shall I waken her?"

"By no means!" The doctor still stands with his hand upon the door; and now he opens it and looks out. "I was just on my way to dinner," he says, turning back toward her, "and I see your own is coming. I must go down."

"Oh, dear!" she sighs, "I wish I could go down to dinner! I never could eat with relish in this way! I lose my appetite at once!" As she speaks, a maid enters with the dinner tray, and places it upon the light stand near the door.

"Is there anything else, Rosa?" she asks, and being answered in the negative rather crustily, she skurries out and away. But the doctor lingers.

"Let me see," he says; "it won't do for you to lose your appetite! An appetite is very necessary for a good nurse. I'm glad you spoke

of this! Let me see—I think there can be no harm in sending you down to eat with the others; none whatever.—Sarita is sleeping so well, she may not waken for some time. Here, I will just set this tray outside, and you may tell them to come after it at their leisure, and that you will ring for the patient's tea when she wakes."

"But," begins Rosa.

"No buts!—It's quite safe! There's no danger of her waking, if she has just fallen asleep, for this floor is quite deserted, save for us. Brook is sleeping, and the new man is a very quiet person. There'll be nothing to arouse her, and you can be back in twenty minutes. Come out now, and I'll close the door."

Rosa glides out softly; the door closes; but, singular oversight, it is not locked.

A moment later a grey head and a pallid face lifts itself from the pillows, and listens breathlessly; a moment more, and Sarita, looking ill, indeed, and tottering as she stands, has crept out upon the floor. Catching by a chair to steady herself, she makes her way to a corner table, where, from among a number of bottles, she selects one, puts it to her lips, and takes half-a-dozen quick gulps. It is a strong wine, and, after a moment, aided by this and an iron will, she stands steadily, hurriedly pushes back the straggling locks from about her face, and, opening the door, pauses a moment to listen. All is quiet, and she glides out with fast-beating heart, and lips set in desperate determination.

The light table, with the well-filled tray, stands beside the door, and she puts her hands upon it. It rests upon rollers, and she pushes it before her, over the soft carpet, almost without a sound.

"'Tis my only chance!" she mutters between set teeth; "it must work!"

From her door to the upper end of the long hall seems a weary way, and she must go slowly, because of her weakness and the contents of the tray; but she stands at Brook's door at last; and, after one desperate look about her, she taps lightly, three slow taps.

The new man starts and looks irresolute; he has been talking with his charge, who has been awake for some moments, and who is quite rational; but, if he sees the sudden start and flash that lights the pale blue eyes, he makes no sign, but gets up and goes stolidly to the door; bent, evidently, upon doing his duty.

Opening the door the merest crack, he peers out. "Who is it?" he demands.

"Sh, man!" whispers a voice close to the door, "put your ear to the crack;" and as he complies, "I have brought your supper, and the doctor says he is not to have his for an hour, and it's to be plain, and no wine. You're to make him go into the inner room, and then step out here and eat, while I take your place inside. Mind you stay close by the door; there's a chair near by, and you are to lock the door on the outside while you eat, and be quick about it."

"All right!" With an air of solemn authority the new man closed the door, and, turning, placed his back against it. "You're to go into that room," he commanded, pointing to the inner door.

"Why?" demanded Brook.

"So I can eat my supper."

"Be quick!" said a voice through the key-hole.

Brook turned suddenly, went into the inner room, and closed the door behind him.

Standing close beside it, he heard the outer door open and shut; and, opening the other in haste, he started back at sight of Sarita's agonised face; then his own countenance blazed as with sudden wrath, and he caught her fiercely at her wrists, as she stretched her thin, weak arms toward him.

"For God's sake!" he hissed, "what is it? why have you kept away so long?"

She threw herself upon him, and caught his head in her arms, kissing him madly, but releasing him instantly.

"My boy! My Pierre! listen," she moaned. "All is over! everything! and—"

"What! the trial? quick, tell me—"

"I know but this: Bruce is cleared! and you, you—oh, my boy—!"

He thrust away her clinging hands, and caught her roughly by the shoulder. "Cleared! how cleared?—tell me?"

"The detectives!—they have been in this house for weeks! The old uncle—the doctor—they have found out everything!"

He caught her arm, and looked fiercely into her eyes.

"Stop raving, and tell me the worst! Have you weakened?—betrayed me and yourself? Quick! we shall be interrupted!"

"I have said it. The man, the Uncle Holly, is a detective! He has found out everything from the beginning. Tracked you from the bank to the church—to the attic—everywhere! He has—ah, *mon Dieu!*"

He had flung her from him, and, for a moment, his pale face writhed, as if transformed into the face of a demon, while the blue eyes shot baleful fire.

"Curse you! You have made some devilish blunder! Been bought, most likely!"

"Bought! I! your mother?"

"Bah! If you are my mother, which I doubt, why not? You sold me in my infancy—"

"For your good! *mon Dieu!* only for that. That you might be rich, and never work, or, perhaps, become a thief, a brigand like the father whom you resemble," she cried, stung by his taunts. "Ah, you had better hear me and understand before they take you unawares. I tell you they have never been deceived by you, never! They have told me—proved to me, how much they know; and it was only by signing a confession—"

"WHAT!" As he leaped toward her with uplifted hand, she sprang backward. "You have betrayed me, then—?" He ceased, and fell back suddenly. The woman had fallen, because of dizziness or weakness. In her quick recoil, before his threatening hand, she had swerved aside and fallen, her head striking the edge of the marble slab which formed the top of the dressing-case; and he saw a tiny stream of blood trickle across her ashen face.

And then, before he could move, the partly closed chamber door

swung open, and the man he had known as Uncle Holly, and looked upon as a venerable weakling, stepped nimbly across the space between them, and, catching him by the throat, forced him back upon the bed just behind him.

"You villain! Are you trying to increase your list of murders before your career is closed? Wells, come here and look after this fellow! Doctor, here is more work for you; call Rosa; I'll attend to this person!"

Sitting half stunned upon the side of the bed, with Tom Wells, grim and silent, and hatefully muscular, standing over him, Brook saw his mother carried out and placed upon the couch in the room beyond; with the doctor and Rosa bending over her, and the detective waiting silently, and without so much as a glance in his direction, for the doctor's first word.

"She's stunned," said the doctor; "it's a bad hurt; perhaps a dangerous one; we will take her to her own room at once."

When they had carried the senseless woman out, the detective made a step to the inner door.

"Joe," he called, and getting no answer, went himself, and closed the door of the outer room. Then standing in the doorway of the chamber, and directly facing the silent wretch sitting moveless under the watchful eye of Tom Wells, he began, in a low tone, full of concentrated contempt and menace:

"Now, Mr. Pierre Pinchon, until lately known as Brook Deering, you have finished your career in a manner worthy of you! It is not every assassin who begins, if that was the beginning, by killing the guardian and protector of the girl he has wronged, to save his reputation; follows this up by poisoning the man who took him from the gutter, and has showered him with benefits all the years of his life, to secure to himself a fortune; and ends by trying to murder the mother who has sinned and suffered for him, and who was seeking to find him a way of escape! What she was striving to tell you was the truth; but not all of it! Your career has been traced from the moment when you decoyed Rose Matchin from her home, hiding yourself behind the name of Bruce Deering, up to the present. Your last piece of active villany being your attempt to meet Miss Wardell in the grounds, and, by so doing, to bind her more closely to you and your cause! You have played high and terrible stakes, for three fortunes, and would have sacrificed, if need be, one, or all, of three fair women to attain your ends! Rose Matchin you wooed as the betrayer wooes; and, but for this sudden ending of your devilish plotting, she might very soon have met the death that comes to so many victims of beasts of prey like yourself, when they begin to be in the way! Ora Wardell you would have married for the sake of her fortune, had not another fair face and another fortune crossed your path. But you were not sure of success with Miss Rodney; and so, while trying to woo her, you renewed your broken engagement with Miss Wardell."

The pale face of the man sitting with sullenly bent head before his accuser, was seen to flush suddenly, only to pale again; and he cast a furtive glance about him; but he saw his position, and he did not lift his head, nor stir.

"When you left Rose Matchin in a good school, and went abroad generously supplied with the means for honest enjoyment, you had the chance that comes to few, to be rich and honest without effort upon your part. And yet, before leaving this house, with your vows to the man you believed to be your father, fresh upon your lips, you sought the woman you supposed to be your too devoted nurse and tool, and besought her to aid you in winning Valentine Rodney—and her fortune!"

At the name of Valentine, the flush again crossed Brook's face, and he shivered slightly.

"You went abroad," went on the detective remorselessly, "plotting to gain your ends. You were jealous of Bruce Deering, and you feared him as a rival; probably your then unknown mother informed you that Bruce was likely to supplant you with Miss Rodney. And so when you met Miss Wardell, you provided for yourself an anchor to windward. And then your fever for gambling broke out, and, when you had wasted all your ample allowance, you 'borrowed' of Miss Wardell, and forged Lysander Deering's name! You thought your supposed father an easy dupe, but he had not lost sight of you.

"One day, after learning that you had added forgery to your list of vices, he decided to write you the truth! He began the letter in his library, and for a moment was called to the outer door, to say a farewell word to a departing caller, who had asked for him; during his absence, Madam Sarita, who was always watching and prying on your behalf, stole in, and saw what had been written! And so it happened that you received two letters close together; the first telling you that you were not the son of Lysander Deering; and the second revealing the fact that you were the child of Sarita Pinchon—and a French adventurer!"

There was a sound as of teeth sharply grated, and the muscles of the clasped hands swelled as from a too tight clutch, as the detective continued:

"How Lysander Deering could have lived under the same roof with your mother, yet never guess the truth as to your relationship, is a puzzle to me! But he was the last man to look for deceit, or to doubt those about him; and so he never guessed how you were growing up; absorbing, as you grew, lessons in deceit. Taught to look to her for help out of your youthful escapades, and to go to her secretly for the favours others would not grant, your innate selfishness and greed, pampered and developed through foolish mother-love, and secrecy and deceit, becoming your daily lessons.

"We need not go over all the ground of your late reappearance in Pomfret; when you left Miss Wardell you hung about the bank, watching, doubtless, for the old man to retire or, possibly, for a later hour; at last you see, through a crack in the curtain, that he is about to retire. The street is quite deserted—you tap upon the window, you tell him that it is Bruce—who must give him some important news at once, and you are admitted. Just why you went to the bank that night we may never know. That you killed Joe Matchin with Mr. Baird's hatchet; that you robbed the sphinx safe of thirty thousand dollars, having knowledge of the ten words by which, alone, the com-

bination was worked, we do know; also, that you left, thrust into the register, half of a bloody handkerchief, with the initials B. D. upon it; and that in your struggle with Bruce Deering you lost an amethyst cuff button.

"This button, by the way, or such another, had been given you by Mrs. Deering, and you had obtained its mate at Tiffany's. The fragment of linen was recognised at once, by Miss Wardell, as one of a dozen owned by you, and bought in Paris at the *Bon Marché*."

"You lie!" Brook lifted his head to hiss out these words, and instantly dropped it again, as if regretting his momentary outbreak.

"Ah! You mean, of course, that you think Miss Wardell's devotion to you is proof against everything? And so it would be, and is against misfortune, calumny, even sin! Leave her faith in a friend's honour, and she will never forsake him! But baseness, treachery! such crimes as yours, kill every sentiment in such a heart, except loathing unutterable. If you would know how a good woman can thrust out from her heart, in one hour, every atom of regard for a man whose baseness has been made clear to her, you should have heard Miss Wardell denounce you! She spared neither you nor herself; and, from this day, you might sooner expect, or hope, for help or pardon from justice itself than from her! Oh, we know it all—and from her own lips! How she hid you in her home and in the church, as your mother, later, hid you in the attic here.

"As for the mistress of this house, I have only to say that she has read the paper stolen from her by your mother. Yes, I know," as the prisoner started, "you commanded her to destroy it; but you had refused to believe, or pretended not to believe her, until she had placed this paper before you; and she did not mean to put it in your power ever to deny her again! So she has kept the paper. And now, let me tell you how it is that you are not now in prison."

As briefly as possible he told how the trial had been managed, and Bruce Deering acquitted, without bringing the name of Deering again into disgrace; and how Sarita Pinchon's confession had been framed.

"And now," he concluded, "knowing you to be a double assassin, the poisoner of your adopted father and benefactor; a forger, robber, and perjurer; yet, for the sake of the name she bears and honours, Mrs. Deering will refund the money stolen from the bank, and you may retain that which you must still have. With this you are to go at once to France, and, if possible, Sarita must accompany you. Remain there, under some new name, and never let your identity be known, and you will not be molested. Attempt to return to America, and you will be at once arrested for murder! You must leave here in such a manner that it may be made to seem that you are still partially deranged. After a time the word must go out that you are dead! Dead, and buried abroad. The *rôle* we have allowed you to play, for our own purposes, that of pretended insanity, must cease while you are under this roof.

"While you are not altogether well, you are quite able to travel, and to-morrow you will—if you accept our terms—be escorted to the city by Doctor Ware and myself, ostensibly for medical consultation.

really to see you safely *en route* for Europe. Otherwise your journey will not be so long, and its termination not so pleasant.

"You are given to-night in which to decide; to-morrow morning we must have your answer. It will not do to keep Mrs. Deering and Miss Rodney longer out of their home, and they will not enter this house again while you are under its roof."

He paused; for a moment, there was utter silence in the room, and Murtagh, glancing over his shoulder, saw that the doctor had returned, and was standing just behind him in the doorway. Then he went on:

"I am aware that, in giving you this chance, I am cheating the hangman, and thwarting that justice you have again and again outraged. But, to make your crimes public will be to make the name you have borne, and the name a good woman bears, notorious everywhere. Besides, Lysander Deering, in his last written words to his wife, said this, 'If Brook does prove utterly unworthy, after all, rid yourself of him, if possible, quietly, privately. For your own sake and for BRUCE'S, spare the name of Deering. Send him out of the country; make him take his true name, or another—ours he must give up! Only see to it that he never annoys you further, and let his punishment rest with God. Be sure it will come.' These are the words of the man you murdered, while eating his bread. There is no punishment adequate to your crimes; and so we have yielded to Mrs. Deering's wish. One so fertile in diabolical plots as you, will, sooner or later, devise, meaning it or not, his own punishment! And now, we will leave you—unless your answer is now ready?"

Only once, since Murtagh first addressed him, had the baffled and desperate creature spoken, or lifted his head. But now he arose slowly, and with a wavering, uncertain motion. He did not so much as glance toward them, but turning toward the window closely accompanied by the stoical Wells, he said in a strangely dull, lifeless tone:

"I have nothing to say—until morning."

CHAPTER LXI.

A HORRIBLE MOMENT.

THERE was little thought of sleep in the minds of the men who sat in the library at ten o'clock that night talking over the events of the day. Rather, Murtagh and Ware talked, for the most part, with, now and then, a word from John Redding, who had joined them at dinner at Brenda's request. Bruce was silent, and seemed restless.

A few moments after ten, Rosa came to the door and beckoned to the doctor, who bade her come in.

"Doctor," she began, "Sarita refuses to take her drops; I cannot manage her, this time."

"Really?" there was a shadowy smile upon the doctor's face. "Is she nervous?"

"Very, almost to the point of hysterics. She ought to sleep."

"Does she take the bitter wine regularly?"

"Yes, because she knows its effect."

"Then, I will give you a couple of soluble tablets, which you must contrive to drop into that wine flask. Can you manage it?"

"I think so."

"Very well, they will make her sleep, but not too soundly; and, Rosa, you may leave her door unlocked; and if she wakens, and seems too uneasy, you may feign sleep. I mean to let her visit her son again, if she makes the attempt. I have given instructions to Joe, who watches in the hall, and to Wells, inside. She will be admitted if she goes."

"Why not simplify matters by giving her permission?" ventured Redding.

"Because," it was Murtagh who answered, "she distrusts us! She would at once suspect a trap, and it would end in her not going."

"I see!"

"I fancy our other prisoner will not refuse his sleeping potion," the doctor said, returning to his chair. "For medical reasons I have stopped his allowance of tobacco, of late; cut it off almost entirely; and now he is wild to smoke, so I have given him some cigarettes, mildly flavoured with opium."

Bruce started. "Is there any chance of his smoking too many of them?" he asked, with evident anxiety.

"Not if he smokes them all. They are very mildly flavoured; I count upon the tobacco, quite as much as the drug, for the soothing effect. He will be permitted to smoke, as much as he will, to-night. It is necessary that he should be strengthened and stimulated for to-morrow."

Bruce was silent a moment. Then, "Have you left him any opiate, any drug of which an overdose might be dangerous?" he asked.

"Nothing; and he is well watched. We thought it best to withdraw Wells, before giving Sarita her first chance to enter his room. He would have suspected the trick if Wells had remained."

"I don't understand," urged Bruce, "why Sarita was not allowed more time at first!"

"That," interposed Murtagh, "is because we have not yet explained that point. If I had approached him and charged him with his crimes, he would doubtless have continued to feign insanity. We knew that Sarita had been watching for a chance to slip out and warn him, and we let her have it. It opened the way for us, and left him no room for the insanity dodge! If he had not struck her, we might have let them prolong their interview. What she wants now is opportunity to plead with him, that she may go with him or follow after. We want to give them both the chance, without seeming to relent. For my part, I confess I am curious to know if there is a spark of human feeling in him!"

"So am I," declared Doctor Ware.

But Bruce sighed, and was silent.

. . . . . .

Shortly after midnight, Rosa, resting with closed eyes but alert ears, upon her couch, opposite the bed where her charge had, for

some time, been lying very quietly, opened her eyes stealthily. The light was burning dimly, and she could not clearly see Sarita's face, but, obeying her instructions, she lay very still, and watched with some surprise the woman's movements.

Sarita had risen, and, after standing for a moment as if irresolute, she went to the corner closet, and took from it the grey gown, which Rosa had persuaded her to remove early in the evening.

This she drew on over her white *robe de nuit*, and, going back to the bed, she stooped at its head as if about to take something in her extended hand. There was a moment of what seemed again like hesitation, and then she turned, and, passing close by the watcher upon the couch, approached a little bracket shelf, which Rosa had cleared of its contents—one or two boxes, a tiny clock, which never kept time, and two or three bottles—to make room for her own "bottles and glasses." Here there was another moment of hesitation, and then, taking in her hand a small bottle which was quite empty, Sarita again brushed past the surprised nurse, and moved with a peculiar, slow, even tread, toward the door. As she opened it and passed out, leaving it ajar, Rosa started to her feet.

"How stupid!" she muttered under her breath; "she's walking in her sleep, of course!"

What should she do in this unprepared-for emergency? Rosa pondered a moment, standing in the open doorway, and then murmured:

"I'll follow her, first!"

She had been told of Sarita's midnight visits to her dead master's chamber, and she was not surprised when Sarita, instead of going toward Brook's rooms, turned in the opposite direction.

As she came out from the cross hall into the main corridor, and saw the slow-moving grey figure, with one hand still outstretched before, she shuddered instinctively at the uncanny proceeding.

The day had been very warm, without the slightest breeze, and the long French windows, that filled the entire front of the broad, middle corridor, and that had been opened wide all day, were only partially closed now. As Sarita paused at the door of the room which she shunned waking, and sought sleeping, a newly-awakened breeze, through the open windows, caused the lamp at the corner to flicker and almost die out.

Owing, in part, to the absence of the only occupants of that hall—Brenda and Valentine, and, in part, to the open windows at either end; for, in the rear, the upper part of the great windows that lighted the staircase was also open—there was but this one light upon the corridor. It illuminated sufficiently the stairs, and that portion of the hall to be traversed by the occupants of the west corridor—which, to-night, was especially well-lighted; so well, indeed, that Tom Wells, lounging there upon the cushions, by the open window at the front, and vigorously agitating a big palm-leaf, could scarcely keep off the winged insects of the night that buzzed eagerly toward the brightness beyond the fluttering curtains.

His request that he might be relieved because of weariness, and the exchange of watchers in Brook's room in consequence, had been, of

course, but a part of the plan by which Sarita was to be permitted, once again, to attempt an interview with her thankless son. And it was hoped that the question—whether the poison had been given the master of Beechwood by Brook or his mother—might be settled. For it would go hard with the dull-looking "new man"—in reality, a very clever fellow—if he did not contrive to overhear the greater part of whatever they might say. Meantime, Wells was beginning to yawn in his window, when the new man came hastily out.

"He's acting very queer," he whispered; "I think you'd better come in!"

"That so?" getting up lazily. "Well—I guess things ain't runnin' quite 'cordin' to order to-night!" and he followed Joe, leaving his outlook at the window just a moment before the two women emerged from Sarita's room, one after the other, and vanished down the cross hall.

Brook had risen and was dressing, muttering brokenly the while. He paid no heed to the two men, and Joe whispered behind his hand:

"Shamming—think?"

Wells shook his head and watched every movement with wrinkling brows—then without noise he made a quick stride forward just as Brook lifted his face after stooping to draw on his slippers. The light shone full upon it, and Wells saw that it was pale and set.

Without a glance toward him, or so much as the quiver of an eyelid, Brook turned away as if looking for something. Instantly Wells moved back to the farther side of the room, and away from the outer door, beckoning Joe to follow him. Joe glanced toward the door.

"It is not locked," he whispered.

"Never mind, let him go!"

"Wh—at?"

"You heard Doc's orders, didn't you?—we are not to watch him too sharp, you know. If he goes out, let him—we'll follow!" He moved toward the door. "He ain't goin' to levant in his stockin' feet."

Brook, who had been looking about him, or seeming to, as if for something mislaid, now came out from the bedroom and began to fumble with the lamp upon the reading-table; turning it down quite low at last, and muttering:

"I must know, I must!"

His eyes were opened wide, and stared strangely; and he walked past the two men, now standing close against the wall, opened the door, and, seeming to look and listen, ventured out—leaving the door, as had Sarita, "upon the latch."

He moved quite swiftly until he had reached the turn, and then, instead of going, as Wells had expected, straight to Sarita's door, he paused once more, listened, peered this way and that, and then turned toward the main corridor, walking now with halting steps, and stopping often as if startled; listening, muttering, and moving on again, while, close behind him, his two watchers followed, one on either side.

And now his murmured words grew more distinct and more frequent.

"Hear them!" stopping with a backward start. "Ugh! getting closer!" he moves forward quickly. "Why does he do it?" listening again. "I must find out!—I must go in!—yes—ugh!—hear that!"

The wind is rising, and now they can hear it rustling among the trees; a strong breeze comes in at the open window, and causes the lamp to flare wildly.

Wells stops long enough to turn it a little higher, then they go on.

And now Brook has paused at the door from whence have issued those ghostly footsteps which have haunted him sleeping and waking. He stands before it, and again seems to listen. With a sinuous creeping movement he draws close to the door and bends his head with his ear to the panel.

Again a strong breeze rustles in the branches without, blows a strong breath down the long corridor, and causes the lights to flare again wildly.

Brook does not heed the wind, but when all is still he starts again.

"Oh, there!—It is there!" he draws back and presses his two palms upon the door. "Yes," he mutters, "I must face it! I will!" He utters the words slowly, in a hollow monotone, draws back, and suddenly thrusts out his two hands—then—

A third time the wind roars through the tree tops, seeming to shriek in at the open windows. Wells and his companion are barely six feet from Brook and that awful door—and yet—

They have seen his shoulders heave and thrust themselves forward, and heard—simultaneously—the wind—a sudden dull crash—and a shriek, so shrill that it is heard through the house, and close upon that, another, not a shriek this, a howl rather, strident, gutteral, like the death scream of some fierce animal.

All this in a moment, and in the same moment total darkness, the wind wailing down the corridor, and, heard in spite of all, a sound of flying feet, a crash of breaking glass,—then, other sounds, following one another in swift succession,—and last, and most hideous of all, a dull sickening thud upon the white stones of the paved entrance—a hollow, awful moan—and darkness all about.

CHAPTER LXII.

ASSISTED JUSTICE.

THEY lifted the shattered and still breathing wreck of Sarita Pinchon's son and bore it, as tenderly as possible, back to his room in the west wing. He was unconscious, and a light but awful burden.

Sarita, too, had been carried in a fainting condition to her room, and consciousness returned after a time; but the events of the evening were a blank. She muttered something about permission—"Mrs.

Deering—and—the attic," and then lay for hours half asleep, and wholly dazed and stupid.

With Brook it was different. Doctor Liscom was sent for at once, and while they were closeted in Brook's room, Murtagh began to investigate.

"He was walking in his sleep," declared Tom Wells. "I knew, the minit I set eyes on him, that he was sleep-walkin'! I had seen her that way," nodding in the direction of Sarita's room; "and I had heard the doctor describe it all. The doctor said once, talkin' about him, that if he could jest see him walk once in his sleep, you know, it would be the last and biggest proof of all. At first I thought, when he didn't go to her room, that he might be goin' downstairs; and when he went up the hall, I was jest on the pint of sendin' Joe after all of ye, when everything come down on us like a clap of thunder. There wa'n't time to think! As for Miss Rosy and Sarity—boss, I ain't in it."

And then Rosa described to them Sarita's sudden setting out for the scene of her former midnight visits.

"I could not see her face distinctly," she said, "when she got up and began to move about; but when she passed close to me, without one glance, and with that set mechanical movement, so different from her nervous, quick manner, I knew that she was walking in her sleep. I did not understand her manœuvres by the bedside, stooping and looking—"

"She used to keep a candle burning near her; I don't know just why. She was looking for that," said Murtagh.

"I see! Well, when she reached the room on the main corridor, and went in, I, of course, knew, from your account, about what she would do; I knew there was no outlet to the room, and that the windows were kept closed of late. At first I thought I would follow her; and then, fearing that I might stumble against something and waken her, which I knew would be bad for her in her condition—"

"Very bad!" assented Murtagh.

"—I waited a moment at the door, and, finding it was not latched, I did venture to open it a little and peep in."

"Ah!—you did?" sharply. "Could you see—anything?"

"It was not a dark night, you know, and the windows are quite free from shade. The one nearest the door was shuttered, but the one opposite the bed was not. Near me I could see only faintest outlines; but, on the farther side of the room, the light fell across the bed, and I could see, quite clearly, the door of the bath-room. There must have been a ray of moonlight shining through the high window in there, for I could see Sarita moving about. The white walls and fittings of the bath-room, and the light, coming as it did from above, gave her quite a ghostly appearance. I suppose I got a little bit nervous; I felt as though she must see me, and I pulled the door shut as I had found it, and crossed the hall. I knew the opposite room was empty; and, finding the door was not locked, I went in there and stood, just inside, looking through a narrow slit. I wanted to see her the moment she came out, and to be as near her as possible."

"I see! No one can blame you, Rosa; nor, in fact, anyone. All that took place was quite unforeseen. Well—"

"I hardly know how to describe what happened next. The other came so quietly, and stopped so suddenly, right before my hiding-place, that it gave me quite a start! It was a full moment before I saw that it was Brook Deering. When he put his hands upon the door I started to spring out, and then the gust of air flared the light so suddenly that I thought it had gone quite out. Then he seemed to listen, and I waited. The rest I saw in a flash. As he pushed the door open, I opened mine; I had one glimpse of Sarita, standing, where the light from both windows seemed focussed upon her, directly in the door of the dressing-room. She had something on which made her look strange; I had not time to see what it was. Of course the madman saw her as soon as I did. He gave a great start as the door swung back against the wall. It must have frightened him horribly to see her standing there. Her scream, his sudden leap backward, and the going out of the light, came all in one breath. I felt him rush past me in the darkness, and, it seemed to me, toward the window. I think I must have lost my head then! I heard a movement below me, and I, too, ran, in the dark, toward the window, knowing it was open, and wondering if he knew it also." She shuddered, and turned away her face.

"How I found myself upon the long balcony, stepping upon crackling glass, and looking down over the low railing, I hardly know! What I *saw* dimly below me I need not *say*. I knew, somehow, that someone was flying down the dark stairs—"

"That was Wells. Prompt and clear-headed."

"Yes. And Joe was beside me in a moment. It's been a horrible night!"

"Horrible indeed!" echoed the detective. "I do not need Ware's wisdom to tell me how it all came about."

"Eh! what's that?" Doctor Ware had entered the library in his quick quiet way, having found a moment when he could leave Liscom and the man Joe in care of the injured man. "What is it?"

Murtagh rapidly related the facts just learned from Wells and Rosa.

The doctor looked grave.

"I see it all!" he declared promptly. "Rosa, how much wine was in the bottle when you added the two tablets?"

"The bottle was half full, not more; she had taken more than I thought."

"Exactly! and in *that* way, she got a dose strong enough to *stimulate*, as its first effect, as well as to soothe the nerves. She lay down full of thoughts of her son, and of the causes which led to their present troubles. She had determined to sham sleep, no doubt, and make a desperate effort to speak with him once more. I wager—almost, that she tempted *you* to take some wine, Rosa?"

"She *did!* She said it would prevent fatigue, and I made believe drink a little."

"Yes. Well, she went to sleep determined to get up and do a certain thing. Then the opiate soothes in a measure her anxiety and

agitation. But her strong desire to get out lingers in her brain, and she rises in her sleep, and *then* force of habit takes her, *not* to her son's room, but to the place she has haunted of late in her fits of sleep-walking."

"After all," said Murtagh, "you have improved upon my idea of the matter."

"As for the other," went on the doctor gravely, "the withdrawing of the tobacco, and then returning it, suddenly, and with just enough opium to produce in his present unstrung condition, an abnormal mental state—has brought about the somnambulism which I felt sure he had inherited from his mother. I had hoped for an *earlier* development of the symptoms, as an additional proof of his relationship to Sarita; and now that it has come—" he paused and glanced across at Murtagh.

"Now that it has come," supplemented the detective, "it has been as a weapon of fate, and has taken matters out of our hands. If it settles the question left undecided last night,"—he looked keenly at the doctor—"I, for one, shall be grateful to Fate—or Providence."

"Call it Providence," said Ware reverently; and then, in answer to Murtagh's look of inquiry, "It is even worse than we thought; both limbs are broken above the knee, and the spine is injured. If there were no other hurts, if his limbs were sound, he never could walk. Liscom has sent for his instruments; as soon as they come the legs must be taken off, and Liscom fears internal injuries.

. . . . . .

When Ora Wardell left Mr. Baird's library, accompanied by Val Rodney, John Redding had hastened to explain to Brenda and Bruce why they had all thought it best not to make the truth known to them until after the trial.

"You could, neither of you, have gone into the court-room without embarrassment," he said, "if you had known even a small part of the truth; and it was the only way to clear Bruce and shield the name!"

And then arose the question, "What shall be done with Brook, or, Pierre Pinchon?"

"If the question were one of punishment only," said Murtagh, "the law would be inadequate to deal out to him his deserts! If we could trace his ancestry we would doubtless find it of the worst; a long line, perhaps, of reckless social outlaws, somewhere has crept in the strain of handsome aristocratic selfishness, from some woman, perhaps, of the sort one can always see in Paris flaunting her silks and jewels, her beauty and shame all together. Certainly he is thoroughly bad!—A nature that could not live in a pure atmosphere, and enjoy wealth and ease in the simple, honest, American way. He *cannot* be punished *enough;* but the question is, Mrs. Deering, how *much* are you willing the world should know? It is in your hands."

Brenda's answer had been prompt. "If it would bring my husband back, if it would make the vindication of Bruce more complete, I would say, 'Give the murderer to the law.' But I am sure, I know, what my dear husband would say, even of his murderer; and then—besides, there is Ora Wardell. We cannot punish her

for her loyalty to a creature who has deceived us all! If it were only for her sake I would say, 'Bury the awful truth; send him away, and soon!' This much I demand; he must leave my house; and I will never see his face again."

As for Bruce, he had agreed with her in everything.

"Let him go where he can never do us further injury!" he said. "I ask no more."

Of the three—Brenda, Valentine, and Bruce—from the first Brenda had doubted, Val suspected, and Bruce had fought against a feeling stronger than either of these. He had been, from the first, morally sure that Brook could tell the story of Rose Matchin's disappearance if he would; and he knew also that Brook was the owner of an amethyst button. Besides, he could not have grown up near such a nature as Brook's without seeing behind the mask of softness and amiability. But he lacked the clue, as did they all, and he fought against doubt when it pointed toward his beloved uncle's only son.

It was Doctor Ware, with his keen, trained insight, who alone had noted certain resemblances and tricks of gesture and manner—minute, but sufficient to arouse his interest; and—when he heard from Mr. Baird the story of Brook's home-bringing from Europe in his infancy—his suspicions were awakened also. He had perceived, in Brook's face, on the night of the railway accident, and of his pretended return, signs of dissipation as well as of anxiety; and at the first manifestation of insanity, feigned as the doctor knew it to be, he was ready to join hands with Murtagh, and to work for justice and Brenda Deering.

. . . . . .

When the operation was over and the patient in a drugged sleep, Doctor Ware announced his opinion.

There was small chance, he was too honest to say *hope*, for the maimed man. He was suffering horribly, save when they administered opiates, and these they dared not use too freely. There was one chance in fifty that he might survive, crippled, and with his handsome face hideously marred from contact with the stones of the pavement. Again, he might linger a week, or he might die in twenty-four hours.

When this was ascertained, Bruce mounted his horse and rode to Pomfret. When he had called upon John Redding, and imparted his news, the young lawyer promptly relieved him of a part of his errand by going in person to carry the tidings to Ora and Valentine, while Bruce went at once to Mr. Baird's.

Before noon, Brenda had returned to Beechwood, and resumed her place as head of the household. With the exception of Mrs. Merton, the servants had believed that Brook had leaped from the long balcony in a state of somnambulism, and before night it was known to all Pomfret as well. This—and no more.

When the injured man returned to consciousness, and saw the stern set faces bending over him, he seemed bewildered, and whispered feebly:

"What—has—happened?"

But even before they told him, the look of horror that once or twice had been seen upon his face, when he had heard or fancied he heard, the ghostly footsteps of his victim and adopted father, was in his eyes, and he shuddered, through all his shattered frame, as he lay and heard, in torture of body and mind, the worst he must fear, and the best he could hope. And who could say that, in those passing moments, he did not receive through his own mad act, and because of a crime-haunted conscience, a fuller and more complete punishment than the law and the gallows could have wrought upon him.

In the drawn and disfigured face, in the eyes hollow and glittering, one moment distended with horror, and the next filled with the vindictive, venomous hatred of a baffled fiend, there was little trace of the Brook Deering whose smiling eyes and lips and honeyed words had charmed so many, and deceived all. Never had cruelty, selfishness, a conscience depraved, and a mind all evil, been masked behind a face so girlishly handsome, a manner so light as to be thought frivolous by some, and a semblance—such a perfect semblance—of gentleness, affectionateness, delicate sensitiveness.

This man, almost a youth, with the golden hair and soft, blue eyes, which had known how to look fond, tender, sad, gay, pathetic, serious, and serene; but never fierce or vengeful,—this man, who had been seen to falter and turn away at the sight of blood; who would never shoot a robin, and called fishing cruel sport; who turned away from all the ruder games, and practised the gentler graces—this man, stripped of his mask, lay now a naked soul, in a maimed and disfigured body—hateful, horrible; with not one trace of the beauty that could charm women, and win the indulgence of men of stronger mould.

Aware of the nature of the accident that had placed him there under the surgeon's knife, he had cursed his fate, and all concerned in it, between groans of agony; and then, with eyes full of baffled hate, he had lain silent and sullen under their hands, first refusing and then submitting to the anæsthethic, which tided him over the hideous operation, coming out from under the surgeon's hands to find the small shapely feet and crushed lower limbs gone, and to curse, with his first strength, his merciful ministrants.

So two days passed. Good Mrs. Baird came to Beechwood to make the situation a little less unbearable for Brenda; and Valentine, knowing her intentions, wrote to her friend:—

"*Dear Brenda,—If you are ill, and want me, send. If not, and while Mrs. B—— is with you, forgive me if I remain away; I cannot come—yet.* V."

On the morning of the third day, the sick man called for Murtagh; and when the latter came, he whispered:

"Tell me all—about it."

The detective understood, and, slightly frowning, but with no unnecessary harshness, he reviewed the processes by which matters had reached their present state.

When he ceased, Brook seemed to be musing, then:

"Jove!" he articulated, with a malicious glance in his hollow eyes,

"what a—splendid—scoundrel you would—make! You—would—be per—fectly—safe!"

"Is that all?" asked the detective, with a curl of the lip.

"N—no!" He could only speak in broken sentences, and between breaths of pain; but he seemed bent upon saying something. "You —only lack—a little—in—for—ma—"

"True, if you are inclined to help me out, you will save me some trouble."

"What—you—want?" He moved restlessly, and seemed to be undecided.

"I want to know what you did with the money you took from the bank? what you meant to do with Rose Matchin? and—who administered the poison to Mr. Deering?"

The suffering wretch shut his eyes quickly, and a shudder shook his frame, while a dull red flush crept into his face and remained there. Ware, at the head of the bed, and unseen by the patient, raised a warning finger, and pointed to the flushing cheek.

Presently, Brook opened his eyes.

"Where is—she?" he asked feebly.

"In bed." It was the doctor who replied. "She has not had a rational moment since you woke each other up out there in the corridor. When she saw you in the doorway at the moment of her waking, she uttered that one scream, and fell, fairly frothing at the mouth. If she ever recovers her senses, it will be a miracle." He paused, and then, as Brook remained silent, he added: "While you were feigning insanity as an inheritance from the lady, whose son you are not, your true mother was being slowly driven to insanity, real insanity, by you!"

Brook started, and seemed to try to lift himself. His eyes were wide and strained.

"You—you think—I was—never—mad?"

"Not for one moment!"

"Then—then, those footsteps? Do I really hear them?" His eyes began to glitter. "Tell—explain—do they come?"

The doctor came around to the side of the bed. "I will explain as I can," he said gravely. "To begin, your mother, walking in her sleep, went, again and again, to the room where Mr. Deering lay ill, and there went through with a singular pantomime. At times, she would put her feet into Mr. Deering's slippers, and, in them, pace up and down the rooms. The bath-room has a marble floor; its walls adjoin those of your bedroom. At first, probably, you heard her in one of these promenades; we have found, by experimenting, that you could hear through this wall; now you possess a mixture of blood, I am convinced, which has bred in you a vein of superstition. This, aided by your guilty conscience, and with your mother's sleep-walking for a beginning, has developed those ghostly footsteps which have given you some real trouble, amid much of sham. Do you see no retribution in the fact that it was the ghostly footsteps, conjured, it is true, by your own imagination, that sent you flying from it, down that darkened hall, and over upon the stones below?"

The hollow eyes closed; and again there was a quiver visible beneath the snowy coverings, but no reply.

Then followed a half hour of quiet in the room, broken only by moans from the bed, or the nerve-trying sound of grating teeth; then Tom Wells came in, and Ware, giving him a few low words of instruction, went quietly out.

A moment later Brook spoke.

"Are—you—there—officer?"

Murtagh went over to the bedside.

"I am here," he said quietly.

"And—he—?"

"Doctor Ware has gone out." Murtagh sat down beside the bed.

"Don't—think—I am—weak! It can't hurt me—now!"

"Don't try to say too much at once, man!"

"Now," persisted the other, "to tell—what you want—to know."

"All right—go easy."

"The money—is—stuffed—under the lining—of—bottom—my trunk."

"Ah!"

"All but two—thousand—I—"

"Which you sent to the Frenchwoman in charge of Rose, by Miss Wardell?"

Brook's eyes looked big with surprise; almost with admiration.

"And," went on the detective, "to save your breath, I think I can tell you your plan. You had bribed the Frenchwoman with two thousand; she was to keep the girl interested—entertained—and, as soon as it could be arranged, she was to spirit her off to France. You thought she would not be likely to get back—from there—eh! am I right?"

"Yes—and—you're—a—a wonder!"

There was a long and suggestive silence. Then Murtagh ventured:

"Is there anything else—before—"

"Yes—yes!—the—the poison! She is not so much to blame; she meant to save me—the money!" he had gasped this out hurriedly, but faltered at the last. "It was—quite—easy—we worked together. He liked her—to fuss up—his pillows,—and—I would drop it in—the glass,—or else—I would—talk to him—and she—" he gave a great gasp. Then—in a moment—"You understand?"

"Perfectly!" Murtagh arose, and stood looking, for a moment, down upon the flushed face. Then:

"You are a devil!" he exclaimed, and turned his back upon the bed.

That night, while the doctor and Joe kept watch, Brook suddenly jerked the freshly-dressed stumps of the amputated limbs sidewise, and within reach of his hands; and, before he could be prevented, had torn off the dressing from one of them.

But Doctor Ware was prompt, and Rosa, in Liscom's absence, rendered efficient aid. When the mischief was repaired, Doctor Ware looked down upon him and said, with solemn sternness:

"Man, you need not hasten your passage. The ghostly footsteps, from which no man escapes, will pause, here, where I stand, soon; and then you'll thank me for not letting you go out into the Unknown with this last—the sin of sins—upon your soul! Out of the mass of crime and

shame that will envelop your memory soon, leave one that is not shameful! At least, let us say of you, that you were not a coward—physically. It's hard, I know, but—" he broke off abruptly—why probe for a conscience which must be worse maimed and more feeble than this almost lifeless body? As he was about to turn away, the pale lips moved, and he bent to listen.

"Bruce?"

Bruce Deering had not hesitated, when his strength and unshaken nerves were needed, to do his part at the bedside, and during the operation, but it was always when the patient lay insensible, or when his task kept him beyond view from the bed.

"If I approached him," Bruce had said to Ware, "it must be at his request! I am not—a saint—yet!"

"Bruce?" the doctor turned back, and his voice was stern; "there is but one thing that you, as a dying man, can say to Bruce Deering. When you are ready to say that, he will come."

The dying man pressed his lips together, frowned, and closed his eyes. The doctor beckoned Wells to take his place beside the bed, and again turned to leave the room; with his hand upon the door he paused, turned his head, and then came back to the bedside.

Brook, with his eyes still closed, was speaking, brokenly, as before, and very faintly.

"Curse—him!" he aspirated. "He's only—been—in—my—way!" he seemed struggling for breath. Then, "The name—was—the girl's blunder—at first—I found it—useful—later. For the—rest—it was—not premeditated!"

"By which you mean," asked the doctor, "that the chance of his appearing at the bank that night, and the opportunity it gave you for posing in Miss Wardell's eyes as not only innocent, but a martyr to friendship, was seized and utilised by you?"

"Y—es," gaspingly. "In—self—de—f—ence."

"Faugh!" Ware moved back, and the disgust upon his face was read by the dying eyes of the unrepentant egotist—egotist to the last. He seemed to nerve himself for another effort, but Ware checked him.

"Listen," he said sternly, "and don't try to talk now; it will shorten your moments, and they are short enough—for you. I am going to give you another opiate; and in an hour you may say anything you may wish to say. And, if you have any least fragment of a rudimentary conscience, let it influence your words, for, I warn you, they will be your last!" He put his finger, as he had done from time to time, upon the fluttering pulse, and then added: "I've been taking careful note, man, and I tell you now that you cannot live until morning."

There was a fluttering of the eyelids, and a twitching of the pale, thin lips, but no sound came from them; and the opiate was given and taken silently.

Late in the afternoon, Murtagh came to Brenda's door.

"Ware tells me," he said to her, "that the patient cannot possibly live until daylight to-morrow. And—the man seems to think of everything—he suggests that—Miss Rodney be informed at once; for appearance sake she should be here; if—if you still wish to bury this man's secret with him."

"I do!" she said with decision. "I will send for Val at once! Tell me, has the doctor decided—about Sarita?"

"He believes that there is really hereditary insanity in her case, and that she will remain hopelessly insane. There is no need for judge and jury there, Mrs. Deering; the justice of Heaven is swifter and more awful than our little tribunals."

CHAPTER LXIII.

AND PEACE AT LAST.

BROOK DEERING, or he who had borne that name all the years of his life, died at two o'clock in the morning.

During the earlier hours of the night, he had rested, and, after a time, slept under the spell of the powerful opiate; and he awoke, finally, from its influence, seemingly refreshed and strengthened; but the strength only served to prolong the struggle to come.

It was a hideous deathbed; there were no last words of repentance; evidently there was no desire to repent. As the last hour approached, horrible spasms of pain racked the shattered frame, a last manifestation of some internal injury, and the sufferer lay writhing and raving; beseeching them to shorten the agony, to "take his life," to "make an end of him," and then, between suffering and the fear of death, his courage forsook him utterly, and he was an abject, grovelling, pitiful thing.

Shortly before two o'clock, the pain seemed to lull, and then to leave him altogether, and he sank into a lethargy which looked like sleep; from this, after a little, he awakened with a shriek which pierced the ears of those about him, and was heard in the corridors beyond. His eyes seemed starting from their sockets, his teeth chattered.

"Hear!—do you hear?" he screamed, "the footsteps—coming!" With an effort that seemed superhuman, he flung himself across the bed, uttering a second shriek, that ended in a gurgle. Wells and the doctor caught him, and laid him gently back upon the pillows. There was a purple stain upon his lips, and his eyes were staring horribly. Who can say what he had heard or seen in that moment of dissolution? Who can say, out of full knowledge, that the footsteps of his adopted father, treading, perhaps, some Elysian field, did not pierce to the ears of the murderer, sending his soul, terror-stricken and haunted still, over the border line?

Brook Deering's funeral was as quiet and as nearly private as was possible. There were numerous good reasons for this, as all Pomfret could see—with some delicately rendered assistance:—such as the quite recent death of the master of Beechwood; the ill-health of its mistress, for Brenda, now that all was over, was really prostrated; the recent trial in which the "cousin" of the dead young man had figured so strangely; and, last, the shocking manner of this death.

"Been in poor health all summer, poor feller!" related a knowing citizen on the morning of the funeral. "Sleep-walkin' run in the

blood,—'t seems, on the mother's side ; but it hadn't cropped out for years. Sickness, and such a lot of worry, and excitement brought it out, you know, and he jest walked off of that balcony, before anybody could stop him. Sound asleep? Yes, sir! I know! fer I had it, every word, straight from Tom Wells, that was helping to nurse him!"

Somehow Tom Wells found occasion to visit the shops, saloons, and lounging places of Pomfret, often, at about this time, and he was always obligingly ready to relate the true story, "of the last Beechwood calamity." It is not surprising, therefore, that his version of the matter came to be the popular and accepted one.

It seemed strange, to some, that there were no ladies in the carriages that bore the "mourners" (?) to the grave in which they laid the man who, dead as well as living, was yet a lie. These mourners were—"Uncle Holly," representing Brenda, and with more propriety in the act than was known, or guessed, by the many ; Doctor Ware, Bruce Deering, and Mr. Baird, for appearance sake. Brenda's illness was her sufficient excuse; and as for Valentine, not for the sake of all the proprieties together would she leave Brenda's bedside, to follow the body of "that double murderer" to his grave.

There was no mourning for Pierre Pinchon ; the only heart that could now grieve for him, was pulsating in a senseless body, and beating time to the vagaries of a reasonless brain.

As for Ora Wardell, whatever she suffered—and such a woman must have suffered cruelly, in spite of her proud disclaimer—she hid within her strong heart, and, in a few days, she drove over to Beechwood to inquire after the welfare of its mistress, a trifle paler than usual, a little more subdued than of old, and not quite so quick and trenchant of speech as formerly; but a proud woman still ; with never a word of the past, nor a sign that she had, in common with the inmates of that house, just passed through an ordeal as by fire. All that she had to say of Brook Deering, then or ever, was said to Valentine Rodney, at the time of the denouncement, when they were alone together, on the day of the trial, and no one ever heard her mention his name afterward.

Sarita Pinchon never recovered her reason. For weeks she lay under the care of Rosa, who could control her better than the professional nurse, who came to take charge of the case, but remained, simply as an assistant. Gradually it became known, through Pomfret, that "poor Sarita" had been so attached to Brook Deering that the shock of his death, coming, as it did, when she was already ill, had first prostrated her, and then, because of her already weakened state, deprived her of her reason.

Only the few who were in the upper hall at the moment when the two sleep-walkers were awakened, simultaneously, by the heavy thud caused by the door pushed so sharply inward, and against the wall, by Brook's unconscious hand,—knew how the man,—suddenly awakened while under the delusion that he was following to their source his victim's ghostly footsteps,—saw, standing in the light shed through the opposite dressing-room door, what, to him, seemed to be the spectral figure of Lysander Deering, clad, as he had so often seen him,

in the flowered dressing-gown, which, indeed, was more distinctly visible than the face above it.

His shriek, and the mad blind rush, anywhere, away from the awful vision, followed, as it was, by a second shriek from Sarita,—who, flinging aside the loose gown, fled after him, to be caught back by restraining hands at the very railing over which the form of Brook had just hurled itself to the stones below—was something not soon to be forgotten by the witnesses.

But these witnesses were discreet, even in the midst of so much excitement, and the true story of the scene in the wind-darkened main corridor never was known outside of the little group most interested, and which included, of course, Brenda and the friends who had stood by her so stanchly through all her heavy trial.

Taken from the balcony insensible, and waking reasonless, Sarita, too, was out of the hands of earthly justice and judgment. After weeks of feebleness, during which her thoughts had gone back to the early days in France, thereby throwing some light upon her life previous to her meeting with Mr. Deering; not a good light, by the way, but one which made it evident that the nurse Marie Pinchon had palmed off upon the Deerings, was not the widow of an accidentally killed cousin, but her own sister, Sarita Pinchon, and that sister's illegitimate child.

Sarita raved much of this bargain, and of "Baby Pierre," but she never uttered the other name, Brook. As she grew stronger she became quieter, save for periodical fits of the maddest raving; at such times it was necessary to use force to restrain her, and she was taken, finally, to a distant asylum, where she lived for some years, a madwoman to the last.

It was supposed by the servants, and by Brenda also, that the woman, who had always been frugal, almost parsimonious, had saved from her liberal wages a considerable sum of money. But, in reality, she had nothing; and it was made apparent, through certain papers and memoranda found among her effects, that Brook had absorbed all her earnings; and so Brenda assumed the expense of her keeping, and saw to it that she was neither neglected nor ill-treated.

The unexpected conclusion of the Matchin trial was a great blow to Jonas Wiggins and his wife Jane. It came to him as a personal injury, and, after some fruitless raging, he went home to consult his shrewder half.

Out of the many new and surprising ideas brought away from the Pomfret court-house, Jane, after some time, evolved one, which, to both, seemed good, as an idea; and, possibly, of actual value.

"I tell ye what, Jone Wiggins!" she had said to him, "there's been jest one pint omitted in that there case! near's I can make out, there ain't been a word said about that button business! Now, fer some reason, that thing's been kept dark! I guess I'd see Mr. Bruce Deerin' himself this time; you may not be able to give him the button, fer it must a been his'n; but he may not want you to be airin' that little story over agin—anyway, Mis Deerin's actin's was pretty queer. Maybe they wouldn't like the button story to come to the ears of that judge or the lawyers!"

Now Jonas belonged to that foolish class who never know when they are defeated; and so, one day, he threw prudence to the winds, and bearded the lion, in the form of Bruce Deering, in his den.

But Murtagh, who had anticipated something of this sort, and who had seen the necessity for perfect silence upon this subject, or any other connected with the trial, that might serve to arouse gossip and curiosity—Murtagh was ready, and the weapon he had held in hand for many days, waiting for the right time to come, was brandished in Wiggins' astonished and affrighted face.

"I have a very good memory for faces, you see, Wiggins," he had said, among other pleasant things, to the startled man, "and, while I was keeping a weather eye upon you, for your face somehow had a familiar look, I managed to get a snap shot at you, with a little kodack I carry with me sometimes. Well, I was not mistaken; I had seen you, in a justice court, arrested as accomplice in the case of *arson*. Through the chicanery of the chief fire official, doubtless—it was an insurance fire, you remember—you obtained straw bail, and promptly disappeared. That case has never been settled, Wiggins; and, while I am not anxious to have any hand in the dirty affair, yet, being an officer, of course, duty is duty! I am not now employed upon the case, and I should not think of hunting you up; but, if after, well, say to-morrow night, I should find you or your family, still in or near Pomfret, I shall feel it my clear duty to telegraph to the parties most interested in finding you."

It was a case of "a word to the wise." Twenty-four hours after this interview, the haunts that had best known Jonas Wiggins, in Pomfret, knew him no more; and the fate, or the ownership, of the amethyst button ceased to be a matter of interest.

To the little circle who knew all the truth concerning Sarita Pinchon's son, and the two murders, there remained for many days questions to be asked and answered. Singular features of the affair to discuss; and mutual doubts and suspicions to compare and comment upon.

"The thing that surprises me!" said Bruce, one day, "is, how you, Doctor Ware, came to suspect Brook, as it seems you did almost from the first. Now, for myself, knowing, as I did, something of his affair with Rose Matchin, and coming nearer, because of our life-long propinquity, to a correct analysation of his character than most who knew him, I would still have been in the dark but for that amethyst button found by the fellow Wiggins. Of course I had to think of Brook in connection with the crime then; knowing, as I did, who held the duplicate of the button still in my possession at that time, I could not imagine, of course, how it was done, or how he came to be in Pomfret. And I never mentioned my doubt to a living soul. I looked upon him as my uncle's only child, and I could not denounce him! That was why I was so willing to let Mr. Murtagh withdraw, and cease his investigation. I feared he might learn the truth! And I think," he added with a sigh, "that Uncle Lys had some suspicion of the truth, too."

"His letter proves that," said Doctor Ware; "yet it must have been a suspicion which he dreaded and fought against. Doubtless he

meant that you should be cleared, at any cost; but he counted upon living to see an end of the matter, and, also, of course, upon his influence with Brook! As to me, I think, now, that my doubts began to stir at the moment when I was so sure that I saw a man's figure flit past Sarita, through the rear door, on the night of the railway accident. Sarita declared that I was mistaken, that no one had passed out. Now, I was not accustomed to doubt my senses, I knew that they seldom played me false, and I did not doubt them then. Besides, the woman's manner was excited and nervous; she lingered about the door when the others were busy preparing for the reception of the injured, and seemed loathe to leave it for some time. Then the lamp which had been burning brightly not long before had been mysteriously extinguished. You see I was already in a suspicious mood. When Brook came, he had, he said, been helping for a time to care for the injured, or to aid in some way, in the rain and the darkness; and yet I noted that his hands were not only white and clean, but quite dry! Then, later, you will remember, I was called to look after that lameness, which he declared to have been the result of the accident of that night; there was, indeed, some black and blue bruises, and a raw, irritated surface which was quite badly inflamed, and had evidently been freshly irritated. But, while dressing it, I examined it closely, and I knew it to be a hurt, at least ten days old. Then—you have heard me air my phrenological hobby? I can never come among a group of strangers of varied types without—beginning, at once, to notice the different developments of cranium. I had already noted a certain formation of skull in the woman Sarita, which was quite unusual; although no one not a phrenologist, would ever note so unobtrusive a peculiarity. When I first made this observation, I said to myself, there is a head that you may not see again in a long lifetime! And yet, sitting beside Brook Deering, on the morning after his arrival, I saw the very same cranial conformation, and was startled at the thought it suggested. That, Mr. Deering, was the beginning; the rest came, step by step; and when your uncle was found to have been poisoned, I knew that under this roof were two heads that bore all the characteristic bumps of the murderer."

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With the relief which came with release from suspense, and a full knowledge of the truth, hideous as it was, Brenda Deering found herself rallying rapidly from the prostration which had overtaken her on the night of the murderer's mad leap. When she was able to travel, Beechwood was left for a while to the care of Mrs. Merton; and Brenda, Bruce, and Valentine went in search of rest, and renewed health and strength for one of them, first, to New York, and, later, to the mountains.

In New York they were visited by Ferriss Murtagh, who was now enrolled as one of Brenda's stanchest friends, and claimed by Val, who was developing wondrous spirits in these days, as her partner and confidant, as of old—and, a little later, by Doctor Felix Ware, whose position, as friend of all three, was now firmly established.

The poor girl, who had been left to the tender mercies of the French adventuress, had been sought out by Murtagh and the doctor, at the

request of both Brenda and Valentine; and the detective was now able to tell them of the little good which had come out of so much evil.

He had not found it hard to force the French harpy to loose her hold upon her prey, and leave the city, for her own best good. And then Rose, withdrawn from her baneful influence, was made to comprehend the truth concerning her own position, her uncle's death, and her lover's villainy. At first, she seemed not to realise or not to believe; but, gradually, these two grave, stern men, so different from the weak flatterers she had known, brought her, through much repining, and, later, many self-upbraidings, to a more wholesome state of mind. And then they told her of Brenda's kind proposal, that she should return to the school from which she had been withdrawn, accepting the guidance and censorship of the teacher in whom Lysander Deering had manifested so much faith. Here she might complete the education which had hardly more than begun, and so fit herself for some honest and useful work in the world. And here we may leave her. From such experiences as hers, after true repentance and much striving after better things, have arisen some of those strong women whose lives are a blessing to the sick in body and soul, and who are not afraid to take the hand of an erring, fallen sister and grasp it firmly to help her to rise again.

. . . . . .

And what more is there to add that the reader cannot prophecy or, well—? Bruce and Valentine, with no baffling waves to distress or come between, were sailing now upon quiet seas.

Never for a moment had she doubted him; but her woman's intuition, made keen by love, had told her that he knew or guessed the truth, and could have cleared himself if he would. And her anxiety for him had made her so impatient and unreasonable at times, as if his reticence were not the sore trial which it had been to himself as well as to her.

Long before, Lysander Deering had discovered the open secret of Bruce's love for his piquant little ward, and had approved of it, only bidding Bruce wait until school-days were over, and Val could find time to know herself. And, later, he had seen that her choice was also made, and wisely made. Then had come Brook's infatuation, which drew from his adopted father a warning and reprimand, caused Valentine to look upon him at first with coldness, and then, as he sought every opportunity to pay her clandestine court, with aversion, which gradually grew into distrust and an instinctive recognition of his hostility to Bruce, concealed as it might be. From distrust to suspicion was an easy step, and, when the denouncement came, Val's face gave evidence that to her, at least, the truth had never looked impossible.

It was not until the meeting in Mr. Baird's library, with its happy results, that she learned how Brook, by an appeal to his sympathies and a challenge to his honour, had extracted from Bruce a promise not to offer himself until he, Brook, had returned from abroad, and could have his "equal chance."

How he had thought to rid himself of Rose, to say nothing of Ora

Wardell, in case he had succeeded with Valentine, was an open question. But, doubtless, he had counted upon Ora's pride, the Frenchwoman's cunning, and the fair fortune, which, until he had dipped his hands in blood, had, from his earliest days, attended the nameless waif.

Brenda Deering never forgot or ceased to honour the memory of the husband whose love had so softened and shielded her life, and whose own life, short though it must have been, because of the slowly failing heart, had been so ruthlessly and suddenly snapped by the hand of an ingrate, indebted to him for his very existence. But she was young and beautiful, and peculiarly alone; and if Fate, or Providence, *does* interest itself in the loves of mortals, surely Doctor Felix Ware must have been guided to the place where he was destined to play no small part in a tragedy, and its after results; and when, after many moons had come and gone, he came again and yet again —first, to stand with John Redding and young Morse, beside Bruce Deering, when he claimed Valentine Rodney as his wife; and next, when the name of Brook Deering and the murder of Joe Matchin had ceased to be often mentioned, crowded out of memory almost by later events—when he came to stand beside Brenda Deering in the stately drawing-room, not sombre now, and claim her as Brenda Ware.

Ora Wardell was not present when Val was married; she had gone a few weeks previous—not without kindly farewells and good wishes, however, for both Valentine and Bruce—to pay a long promised visit to her father's half-sister in distant California.

"I am not in tune for a wedding, dear Val," she had said to her friend, for they were firm friends now; "not because I grieve, don't think that! or because I envy your happiness, for I wish you a long life without a shadow. Perhaps it is pride! you may call it that; at any rate, I can't be a bridesmaid at Beechwood yet! You'll forgive me, I know!"

But at Brenda's marriage, months later, Mrs. Bruce Deering being ineligible, Ora Wardell and John Redding stood beside the bridal couple.

It was not a large party. Just those few relatives whose visits, though few and brief, had been welcome—the Bairds, the Liscoms, the Ardens, the Ingrams, and at the last moment, in hot haste, Murtagh, who came from "the thick of an interesting case," to see his friend Ware "safely married." He was warmly welcomed, and when the ceremony was over and he stood beside Valentine, she said to him:

"Will it take another wedding to bring you again to Pomfret, Mr. Murtagh? and, if so, whose?"

"There is one," he said, "which I would come far to see," and he glanced across the room to where Ora Wardell sat, with John Redding standing beside her, his eyes upon her face.

"Is it possible," cried Valentine, "that you do see everything?"

"I saw that," he replied, "at least on his side, on the day of the trial when she showed herself the brave woman she really is—and he is the very man for her—strong, firm, intellectual; she need never be ashamed of him, nor he of her."

"I believe he has cared for her since they were lad and lass in the

old Pomfret Academy. But, until lately, she has been blinded by a false glitter."

"She is not blind now," Murtagh said, and both smiled their agreement.

Before leaving home, Brenda and her new husband drove to the quiet spot where Lysander Deering slept restfully.

"It is a peaceful spot," she said softly, "and I am thankful that no hint of the truth has ever, or will ever disturb his rest. Since no one knows how he died, his grave will never be troubled by sensation seekers, or pointed out as connected with a shameful tragedy. He rests in peace, and now all things are clear to him."

And so they turned away, slowly, but without one glance in the direction of that other grave, not far away, where lay the man who, sleeping well or ill, had gone by a road of shame and sin, to the death of the assassin and coward—literally driven to his grave by the haunting echo of *a dead man's step*.

THE END.

Edinburgh, August 1894.

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